

THE METAMORPHOSIS OF A MUSLIM

*Autobiography of
my Conversion*



Lena Winfrey Seder

هدايتها إلى الإسلام



الدار العالمية للكتاب الإسلامي



IN THE NAME OF

ALLAH

THE ALL-COMPASSIONATE, ALL-MERCIFUL



*Metamorphosis of a
Muslim*

Autobiography of My Conversion

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هذا يتلخص في الإسلام

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PRONUNCIATION AND TRANSLITERATION CHART

Arabic script	Pronunciation	Transliterated as:
أ	short 'a', as in <i>cat</i>	a
إ - ا	longer 'a', as in <i>cab</i> (not as in <i>cake</i>)	â
ب	/b/ as in <i>bell</i> , <i>rubber</i> and <i>tab</i>	b
ت	/t/ as in <i>tap</i> , <i>mustard</i> and <i>sit</i>	t
ة	takes the sound of the preceding diacritical mark sometimes ending in h (when in pausal form): ah, ih, or ooh; or atu(n), ati(n) or ata(n) when in uninterrupted speech	h or t (when followed by another Arabic word)
ث	/th/ as in <i>thing</i> , <i>maths</i> and <i>wealth</i>	th
ج	/j/ as in <i>jam</i> , <i>ajar</i> and <i>age</i>	j
ح	a 'harsher' sound than the English initial /h/, and may occur medially and in word-final position as well	h
خ	as in <i>Bach</i> (in German); may occur initially and medially as well	kh
د	/d/ as in <i>do</i> , <i>muddy</i> and <i>red</i>	d
ذ	as in <i>this</i> , <i>father</i> , and <i>with</i>	dh
ر	/r/ as in <i>raw</i> , <i>art</i> and <i>war</i> ; may also be a rolled r, as with Spanish words	r

Arabic script	Pronunciation	Transliterated as:
ز	/z/ as in <i>zoo, easy</i> and <i>gaze</i>	z
س	/s/ as in <i>so, messy</i> and <i>grass</i>	s
ش	as in <i>ship, ashes</i> and <i>rush</i>	sh
ص	no close equivalent in English, but may be approximated by pronouncing it as /sw/ or /s/ farther back in the mouth	ṣ
ض	no close equivalent in English, but may be approximated by pronouncing /d/ farther back in the mouth	ḍ
ط	no close equivalent in English, but may be approximated by pronouncing /t/ farther back in the mouth	ṭ
ذ	no close equivalent in English, but may be approximated by pronouncing ‘the’ farther back in the mouth	<u>dh</u>
ع	no close equivalent in English: a guttural sound in the back of the throat	‘
غ	no close equivalent in English, but may be closely approximated by pronouncing it like the French /r/ in ‘rouge’	gh
ف	/f/ as in <i>fill, effort</i> and <i>muff</i>	f

Arabic script	Pronunciation	Transliterated as:
ڧ	no close equivalent in English, but may be approximated by pronouncing /k/ farther back in the mouth	q
ڧ	/k/ as in <i>king</i> , <i>buckle</i> and <i>tack</i>	k
ڸ	/l/ as in <i>lap</i> , <i>halo</i> ; in the word <i>Allah</i> , it becomes velarized as in <i>ball</i>	l
ڸ	/m/ as in <i>men</i> , <i>simple</i> and <i>ram</i>	m
ڽ	/n/ as in <i>net</i> , <i>ant</i> and <i>can</i>	n
ۼ - ۼ - ۼ	/h/ as in <i>hat</i> ; unlike /h/ in English, in Arabic /h/ is pronounced in medial and word-final positions as well	h
ۼ	as in <i>wet</i> and <i>away</i>	w
ۼ (as a vowel)	long u, as in <i>boot</i> and <i>too</i>	oo
ۼ	as in <i>yet</i> and <i>yard</i>	y
ۼ (as a vowel)	long e, as in <i>eat</i> , <i>beef</i> and <i>see</i>	ee
ۼ	glottal stop: may be closely approximated by pronouncing it like 't' in the Cockney English pronunciation of <i>butter</i> : <i>bu'er</i> , or the stop sound in <i>uh — oh!</i>	' (Omitted in initial position)

Diphthongs:

Arabic script	Pronunciation	Transliterated as:
أُو ، وُ	Long o, as in <i>owe, boat</i> and <i>go</i>	au, aw, ow
أَي ، يِ	Long 'a', as in <i>able, rain</i> and <i>say</i>	ay, ai, ei

Diacritical marks (*tashkeel*):

Name of mark	Pronunciation	Transliterated as:
fathah	very short 'a' or schwa (unstressed vowel)	a
kasrah	shorter version of ee or schwa (unstressed vowel)	i
Dammah	shorter version of oo	u
shaddah	a doubled consonant is stressed in the word, and the length of the sound is also doubled	Double letter
sukoon	no vowel sound between consonants or at the end of a word	Absence of vowel

ARABIC HONORIFIC SYMBOLS USED IN THIS BOOK

(): *Subhânu wa ta'âlâ* — ‘The Exalted’

(): *Şalla-Allâhu 'alayhi wa sallam* — ‘Blessings and peace
be upon him’

(): ‘*Alayhis-salâm* — ‘Peace be upon him’

(): *Radiya Allâhu 'anhu* — ‘May Allah be pleased with him’

(): *Radiya Allâhu 'anhâ* — ‘May Allah be pleased with her’

ABOUT THE WORD 'LORD'

The word *lord* in English has several related meanings. The original meaning is 'master' or 'ruler', and in this sense it is often used to refer to human beings: 'the lord of the mansion' or 'Lord So-and-So' (in the United Kingdom, for example). The word *Lord* with a capital L is used in the lexicon of Islam to refer to the One and Only God — Allah. In Islam, there is no ambiguity about the meaning of this word. While it is true that one may occasionally use the word *lord* (whether capitalized or not) to refer to a human being, in Islamic discourse the reference of this term is always clear from the context. Whereas for Christians, Hindus and other polytheists, the word *Lord* with a capital 'L' may refer to Allah, to Jesus or to some imagined deity, for Muslims, there can be no plurality of meaning. Allah alone is the Lord, and the Lord is Allah — not Jesus, not Rama, not any other being.

The Editor

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

All praise and thanks belongs to Allah alone, the One, the Almighty and All-Merciful. Blessings and peace be upon Prophet Muhammad, the last of His Messengers and Prophets, and upon his family, his Companions and all those who follow in his footsteps until the end of time.

It is often noted that Islam is the fastest growing religion in the world. Despite widespread misconceptions and controversy, the fact is that many of the Westerners who embrace Islam are educated women who make that choice freely, after careful consideration.

Lena Winfrey Seder is one of those women. As a young Christian from a small town in Virginia, she struggled with religious questions that were only answered when she discovered Islam, which she describes as the light at the end of a tunnel.

In this book, the author recounts the challenges that confronted her, including negative reactions from family, friends and strangers, and how she learned to be patient in the face of adversity. By the grace of Allah, any hardships that she suffered were outweighed by the peace of mind and sense of community she gained. We hope that her account will enable the reader to gain some insight into the motivations and experiences of Ms. Seder and others like her.

May Allah accept the efforts of all those who contributed to the production of this book, and may it be acceptable to Him, *âmeen*.

Muhammad ibn 'Abdul Mohsin Al-Tuwaijri
Managing Director
International Islamic Publishing House
Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

DEDICATION

To my loving husband and my beautiful,
precious sons and baby daughter.

To my kind, loving, caring, supportive parents,
who raised me to become who I am today.

Most of all, to Allah (God) for guiding me
and bringing me peace, security and happiness,
as well as for giving me so many blessings.

DESERT ROSE

(A POEM)

*I began my journey the day I was born.
My name told my destiny.
Yet, it remained hidden for me to discover.
I traveled a long time to get to this moment.
So many cactuses I stumbled over in the dark.
No star lighted my path — I was not yet awake.
Naivety guided me into sandstorms that made wounds in my soul.
Ignorance blinded me as the cactus' thorns scratched me.
However, these wounds propelled me forward and kept me on a
certain path.
One day when I looked ahead, I saw an oasis.
A mirage, I thought, so I slowly walked towards it — expecting to
be fooled again.
When I reached the mirage, I found a rose.
I touched it and found it was no dream.
Entranced by this rose, I placed it in the vase of my heart.
As it took root, it became a part of me.
My blindness lifted, for I could see the true Light.
Faith rested in my heart.
My Desert Rose led me to this destiny.
When I stray, its paper thorns remind me to come back to the
straight path.*

Each day it continues growing, it strengthens my heart and my soul.

I water it with my prayers, my charity, my fasting.

This Rose is here to stay —

It guides me to an eternal Garden.

My thoughts, my goals, my actions are preparing my place in that Garden.

That is where I will rest my roots —

As long as this Rose remains alive in my heart.

Lena Winfrey Seder

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

*F*irst, I want to thank Allah (ﷻ) for giving me the strength and inspiration to write this book. Secondly, thanks to my loving parents who raised me in a moral way. Thirdly, I thank Allah (ﷻ) for my precious son Aziz, whom I love and miss very much and who has inspired me a lot as a writer. Also, I want to thank my husband for his support and my children for giving me the inspiration to tell my story to others. Finally, I want to thank all of the teachers and other people who have helped me throughout my life by giving me knowledge, support, encouragement and advice.

In particular, I want to thank the following people who were present at the turning points in my life: Mrs. Nash, my second grade teacher, who helped me to learn to read and to love reading; Mrs. Kensinger, my high school English and Drama teacher who taught me to love literature, writing and drama; Dr. Massey, the university professor who advised me to get my Master's degree; a big thanks to Melva, who helped introduce me to Islam; and a great thank you to my friend Wajiha, who was the first to truly teach me about Islam. Also, I would like to thank some crucial friends who helped me in my times of need: Amal, Filiz, Nurdan, Jenny, Candice, Nihal, Asmaa, Safia, Zahra, Yasmin, Sahar, and so many others who live in so many different countries.

I have met so many people who have influenced my life and helped me so much, and it would indeed take a whole book to list them all. My thanks go out to them, and may Allah (ﷻ) bless them all.

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

Bismillah ir-Rahmân ir-Raheem

(In the Name of Allah, the Most Merciful,
the Most Compassionate)

AUTHOR'S FOREWORD

I would like the reader to understand that there is a difference between the real Islam — based upon the Qur'an and the sayings (*hadiths*) of Prophet Muhammad (*Şalla Allâhu 'alayhi wa sallam* — blessings and peace be upon him) — and a cultural Islam, which is a mixture of Islamic teachings and a person's culture.

The real Islam is beneficial to humankind, whereas some features of cultural Islam may actually contradict aspects of Islam. We pray that Allah (*Subhânu wa Ta'âlâ* — Glorified and Exalted is He) guides Muslims back to the real Islam which upholds truth, justice, fairness, equality, rights, freedom and so much more.

When you look at Islam, you should examine the Qur'an — the essence of Islam — rather than taking things from any Muslim you may meet. Muslims are only human and may fall short in practicing Islam. You must go to the source to truly understand Islam and see its beauty.

Welcome and join me on a butterfly's flight through some pivotal points in my life.

INTRODUCTION

Many today are searching for answers about life and the purpose of our existence. There are many lonely souls who search in various places without finding the right answers. Other forlorn and confused souls try to numb their senses with various amusements and addictions in order to forget their inner questioning.

There are answers, if one chooses to listen. The road to truth — to Allah (God, the Almighty) — may not be an easy one, but the answers are with our Creator, the Lord of the Universe. We were created to worship only one god, Allah (ﷻ). In the noble Qur'an, He explains our purpose, He guides us in our lives and He tells us about our destination in the afterlife. With the Qur'an, anyone who is willing to reflect, to contemplate and to use logic can indeed find the road to our Creator and Master, Allah (ﷻ).

As I said before, this road may not be easy. Abu Hurayrah (*radiya Allâhu 'anhu* — may Allah be pleased with him) narrated that the Prophet Muhammad (ﷻ) said: «The hellfire is surrounded by all kinds of desires and passions, while paradise is surrounded by all kinds of disliked, undesirable things.» (Bukhari)

We must realize that the life of this world is temporary, while the life of the hereafter is eternal. We are only travelers in this world, who should be preparing ourselves for the next life. Allah (ﷻ) has said in several places in the Qur'an that we would be tested:

﴿Do the people think that they will be left to say, 'We believe' and they will not be tried? But We¹ have certainly tried those before them, and Allah will surely make evident those who are truthful, and

He will surely make evident the liars.﴿ (Qur'an 29: 2-3)²

﴿Or do you think that you will enter paradise while such [trial] has not yet come to you as came to those who passed on before you? They were touched by poverty and hardship and were shaken until [even their] messenger and those who believed with him said, 'When is the help of Allah?' Unquestionably, the help of Allah is near.﴿ (Qur'an 2: 214)

﴿...[It was] so that Allah might test what is in your breasts and purify what is in your hearts. And Allah is Knowing of that within the breasts.﴿ (Qur'an 3: 154)

Allah (ﷻ) tests us in our faith to see who truly loves and worships Him. These hardships separate the hypocrites and the weak believers from the truly pious and sincere believers in the sight of Allah (ﷻ).

All of us have been tested. No human has ever lived who has not suffered some hardship or adversity. However, humans differ in their capacity to handle hardships. Some are more patient and more faithful than others. All humans are considered equal regardless of race, color, nationality, or gender; what distinguishes them is their level of piety.

﴿O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you...﴾ (Qur'an 49: 13)

This is something that only Allah (ﷻ) knows, for He alone knows our hearts.

﴿Say, 'Whether you conceal what is in your breasts or reveal it, Allah knows it...'﴾ (Qur'an 3: 29)

﴿Indeed, from Allah nothing is hidden in the earth nor in the heaven.﴾ (Qur'an 3: 5)

﴿To Allah belongs whatever is in the heavens and whatever is in the earth. Whether you show what is within yourselves or conceal it, Allah will bring you to account for it. Then He will forgive whom He wills and punish whom He wills, and Allah is over all things competent.﴾ *(Qur'an 2: 284)*

Life is not easy. No one said it would be. However, what makes life easier and helps us to manage our hardships is having an unshakable belief. We must believe in the Creator, or at least have some kind of belief, to keep us far from depression and insanity. Yet, is this enough? Or does it really matter what our beliefs are? Can we learn to live peacefully and happily, even among calamities and hardships? I believe that it is indeed possible, because I have discovered the path that has changed my life completely and has given me much needed calm, security and peace of mind, heart and soul.

All of us go through life enduring some hardships and tests from Allah (ﷻ). Tests come to every gender, race, nationality, age group and social class. No one can escape them, and each of us has different tests. Money can help us to live a better and easier life in terms of material goods, but it is not everything. The richest person in the world might be the unhappiest, while the poorest might be the happiest. In the end, which is better: peace of mind or comfort of body? Why not try to have both? Islam does not teach that “money is the root of all evil;”³ it allows trading, while forbidding usury.

﴿...But Allah has permitted trade and has forbidden interest...﴾

(Qur'an 2: 275)

One can indeed earn an honest living and even get rich, but he or she must also live according to the divine laws of Allah (ﷻ). These laws will in the end lead to happiness in both this life and the next.

Islam is not just a religion or a philosophy; it is a complete way of life. Many in the West have indeed been misinformed about the real

Islam; either they have misinformation or no information. Also, some who call themselves Muslims may have damaged the image of Islam by not practicing their religion or even by doing deeds contrary to Islam. Unfortunately, many in the West (and actually world-wide) may have met or seen Muslims who were not living according to the real Islam and who gave the wrong impression about Islam. Please keep in mind that humans are not perfect; only Allah (ﷻ) is perfect. If you want to know what Islam is really about, then you must go to the Qur'an, the holy book of the Muslims, and the *Sunnah*, which comprises the practices and sayings of Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ). In other words, go back to the original sources. Note that Islam emphasizes repentance, so we cannot give up all hope for the lost souls who may one day find their way back to Allah (ﷻ).

I was not always a Muslim. I grew up as a Presbyterian Christian and attended a Baptist College, yet I felt that something was missing. I found this 'something', and improved my relationship with Allah (ﷻ), when I embraced Islam about twenty years ago.

I would like to point out that there is no utopia. It does not exist. There will be no perfect world or perfect life until we die and go to paradise. Only in the presence of Allah (ﷻ) and in the perfect paradise will we truly be happy and free. (Let us hope that we do not end up in the hellfire, because that would be eternal misery).

Why would Islam make such a difference in my life? As I said before, we all go through testing. Whether we are Muslim, Jewish, Christian, Buddhist or have any other system of beliefs, we go through troubles, trials and hardships. Allah (ﷻ) has a reason and wisdom for this, which we may not understand. We do not have to understand it; we just have to realize it. We are tested in our faith and given 'wake-up calls'. Sometimes events happen to remind us to return to our Lord or to test our faith and loyalty to our Lord. Yes, some could even be punishment, but punishment that we brought upon ourselves by disobeying Allah (ﷻ).

﴿And he had over them no authority except [it was decreed] that We might make evident who believes in the Hereafter from who is thereof in doubt.﴾ (Qur'an 34: 21)

Allah (ﷻ) has sent prophets and messengers bringing guidance to all nations throughout time. Some people chose to listen and to follow the guidance, while others chose to reject it. Those who followed it suffered adversity with their prophets, but in the end they will be the winners. Those who rejected it, on the other hand, will surely be the losers.

Recall Prophet Job ('alayhi as-salâm — peace be upon him), who was a righteous, pious worshipper of Allah (ﷻ). He lived for ninety-three years. His first eighty years or so were filled with ease and blessings, and during that time he worshipped and served only Allah (ﷻ). Then Allah (ﷻ) tested his faith. He lost his wealth, his children and his health, and he was afflicted with a physical illness that lasted for seven years. Yet he remained patient, as Allah (ﷻ) tells us: ﴿Indeed, We found him [Job] patient, an excellent servant. Indeed, he was one repeatedly turning back [to Allah].﴾ (Qur'an 38: 44)

When Job (ﷻ) finally turned to Him (ﷻ) in supplication, Allah (ﷻ) relieved his distress.

﴿And [mention] Job, when he called to his Lord, 'Indeed, adversity has touched me, and You are the most merciful of the merciful.' So We responded to him and removed what afflicted him of adversity. And We gave him [back] his family and the like thereof with them as mercy from Us and a reminder for the worshippers [of Allah].﴾

(Qur'an 21: 83-84)

After all of his suffering, Allah (ﷻ) gave him back his health, wealth and children. He was rewarded for his patience in this life, and inshallah (God willing) he will be rewarded in the next life, too. After hardship, if one is patient, he or she will indeed find some comfort or ease in his or her situation.

﴿For indeed, with hardship [will be] ease [relief].﴾ (Qur'an 94: 5)

Allah (ﷻ) not only gives ease after hardship but also helps us through the adversity by giving us the strength to bear it. One of the keys to faith is indeed patience.

Many other prophets of Allah (ﷻ) suffered in various other ways. It hurts even to be rejected, to be called a liar by idolaters, pagans and the like, especially among one's own people. Allah (ﷻ) says:

﴿And certainly were messengers denied before you, but they were patient over [the effects of] denial, and they were harmed until Our victory came to them.﴾ (Qur'an 6: 34)

We also have the example of the prophet Noah (ﷻ); there is a chapter in the Qur'an named after him, which tells his story. He lived 950 years (and some scholars say one thousand years). During this time, he called people to worship only Allah (ﷻ). Most of them rejected him and the message that he brought; they laughed at him and mocked him. He had only a handful of followers, and even his wife and his son were unbelievers. When the world became so corrupted that Allah (ﷻ) decided to cleanse it, He (ﷻ) commanded Noah (ﷻ) to build an ark and to take the believers with him, along with a pair (a male and a female) of each kind of animal, in order to save them from the coming flood. While building the ark on dry land far from the sea, he was laughed at and called crazy. Only in the end, when rain began to pour down, and Noah (ﷻ) and his followers were safely on board, did his people see that he had been right and they had been wrong.

﴿We had certainly sent Noah to his people, and he said, 'O my people, worship Allah; you have no deity other than Him. Indeed, I fear for you the punishment of a tremendous Day.' Said the eminent among his people, 'Indeed, we see you in clear error.' [Noah] said, 'O my people, there is not error in me, but I am a messenger from the Lord of the worlds. I convey to you the messages of my Lord and

advise you; and I know from Allah what you do not know. Then do you wonder that there has come to you a reminder from your Lord through a man from among you, that he may warn you and that you may fear Allah so you might receive mercy?" But they denied him, so We saved him and those who were with him in the ship. And We drowned those who denied Our signs. Indeed, they were a blind people.» *(Qur'an 7: 59-64)*

Another prophet who was rejected by his people was Şâlih (ﷺ).⁴ His people laughed at and scorned him, and they only let him live because he came from a noble family. They said that they would believe if he gave them a sign. They requested that a pregnant red she-camel come out of the side of a mountain. When Şâlih (ﷺ) supplicated to Allah (ﷻ), and Allah (ﷻ) granted this sign, the people were indeed surprised, but they still refused to believe.

«And to the Thamud [We sent] their brother Şâlih. He said, 'O my people, worship Allah; you have no deity other than Him. There has come to you clear evidence from your Lord. This is the she-camel of Allah [sent] to you as a sign...» *(Qur'an 7: 73)*

«Said those who were arrogant, 'Indeed we, in that which you have believed, are disbelievers.'» *(Qur'an 7: 76)*

Şâlih (ﷺ) told them to share the water of the well with the camel by turns. The camel even provided them with milk to drink, yet the evil-doers hamstrung the camel.

«So they hamstrung the she-camel and were insolent toward the command of their Lord and said, 'O Şâlih, bring us what you promise us, if you should be of the messengers.'» *(Qur'an 7: 77)*

Allah (ﷻ) saved Şâlih (ﷺ) and his followers, while destroying the rejecters of faith.

«So the earthquake seized them, and they became within their home [corpses] fallen prone. And he [Şâlih] turned away from them and

said, ‘O my people, I had certainly conveyed to you the message of my Lord and advised you, but you do not like advisors.’》

(*Qur'an* 7: 78-79)

The story of Prophet Joseph (ﷺ), who suffered from childhood into adulthood, is told in a chapter in the Qur'an that is named after him. When he was young, his brothers were jealous of him and his close relationship with their father. They threw him into a well, telling his father that a wolf had eaten him, and he was found there by travelers who sold him into slavery in Egypt, where he suffered. When he refused the advances of a beautiful, powerful woman, he ended up in prison, where he stayed for some time. He stuck to his faith, though, even preaching to fellow inmates. Finally, he was freed when he interpreted the king's dream. In the end, he was rewarded with a high position and reunited with his family. How many people can be as strong, patient and faithful as Joseph (ﷺ)?

The story of Moses (ﷺ), who was rejected by Pharaoh and his followers, is mentioned often in the noble Qur'an.⁵ Only Pharaoh's wife, Âsiyah, and a few others believed in Allah (ﷻ). Even after several signs and much suffering, the others still refused to believe.

﴿Then We sent after them Moses with Our signs to Pharaoh and his establishment, but they were unjust toward them...﴾ (*Qur'an* 7: 103)

﴿And [mention, O Muhammad], when Moses said to his people, ‘O my people, why do you harm me while you certainly know that I am the messenger of Allah to you?’ And when they deviated, Allah caused their hearts to deviate. And Allah does not guide the defiantly disobedient people.﴾ (*Qur'an* 61: 5)

Even Jesus (ﷺ)⁶ was rejected by his own people, the Jews. They refused him as a prophet and insulted him and his mother, Mary. To this day, the Jews in general do not recognize Jesus or Muhammad (ﷺ) as prophets of Allah (ﷻ).

﴿And [mention] when Jesus, the son of Mary, said, ‘O children of

Israel, indeed I am the messenger of Allah to you confirming what came before me of the Torah and bringing good tidings of a messenger to come after me, whose name is Ahmad.' But when he came to them with clear evidences, they said, 'This is obvious magic.'» *(Qur'an 61: 6)*

Muhammad (ﷺ)⁷ was rejected by the people of his own tribe. They had known him all of his life, and he came from their most noble and respected family. They used to call him 'The Trustworthy' before his prophethood. He received prophethood at the age of forty, when the angel Gabriel (ﷺ) visited him to give him the news. When Muhammad (ﷺ) began to preach, asking the pagans to leave their gods and idols and to worship only Allah (ﷻ), they launched a bitter, tough campaign against him and his followers. They began by calling him a liar; then they said he was a magician, a soothsayer, a poet (although he was illiterate, which is proof that the Qur'an a miracle), and a lunatic. They used to throw dust on his head and thorns in his path; they even threw the intestines of dead animals on his back while he bent in prayer. Some of his followers were physically tortured until they died.

Because the Prophet (ﷺ) was guaranteed protection by his clan, the Quraysh declared a boycott which prohibited any social contact or business dealings with members of the clan. As a result, the Prophet (ﷺ), his family and his clan lived in exile in a valley outside of Makkah for two years, without access to food except for small amounts that were smuggled to them. They suffered severe hunger and hardship until a few sympathetic Makkans successfully appealed for the boycott to be lifted.

It was a difficult time for the Muslims. Some of the early Muslims migrated from Makkah to Abyssinia (known today as Ethiopia) to seek refuge with the righteous Christian king who ruled there. Later, the Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) met with some delegates from Yathrib (later to be called Madinah). These people embraced Islam and

promised to protect the Prophet (ﷺ) and the other Muslims when they migrated to their city. Thus, the Muslims moved to Madinah from Makkah. Many of them lost their properties and were cut off from their relatives. In some cases, pagan relatives refused to let them go. The pagans even attempted to kill the Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ), but Allah (ﷻ) protected him from their plans.

Once the Muslims were established in Madinah, Allah (ﷻ) changed everything. They had peacefully and patiently endured years of persecution in Makkah at the hands of the pagans. Now Allah (ﷻ) brought them to a new land, where they enjoyed some security and could become stronger. During the first thirteen years, in Makkah, they had been told to be patient and not to retaliate against those who attacked them and took their possessions, but now Allah (ﷻ) gave them permission to fight back. These Muslims, who endured the hardships of living in Makkah persecuted by the pagans, were indeed sincere in faith; they held tightly to their faith despite severe distress. This helped to build their strong characters and to root out weak Muslims, leaving no room for hypocrites. In Makkah, there had been no hypocrites, but they emerged in Madinah.⁸ Only those with sincere faith could withstand such hardships.

The Romans even tried to kill Jesus (ﷺ). Christians may believe that he died on the cross, but Allah (ﷻ) tells us in the Qur'an that it only appeared to be Jesus (ﷺ) on the cross, while it was actually another man.

﴿And [for] their saying, 'Indeed, we have killed the Messiah, Jesus, the son of Mary, the messenger of Allah.' And they did not kill him, nor did they crucify him; but [another] was made to resemble him to them. And indeed, those who differ over it are in doubt about it. They have no knowledge of it except the following of assumption. And they did not kill him, for certain. Rather, Allah raised him to Himself. And ever is Allah Exalted in Might and Wise.﴾

This was Allah's way of protecting him. Jesus (ﷺ) did not die; he was taken up to heaven and protected by Allah (ﷻ). The Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) told us that Jesus (ﷺ) will return to fight the Anti-Christ (*Dajjâl*) near the end of time: «....Allah would send Christ, son of Mary, and he would descend at the white minaret in the eastern side of Damascus, wearing two garments lightly dyed with saffron and placing his hands on the wings of two angels. When he would lower his head, there would fall beads of perspiration from his head, and when he would raise it up, beads like pearls would scatter from it. Every non-believer who would smell the odour of his self would die, and his breath would reach as far as he would be able to see. He would then search for him (*Dajjâl*) until he would catch hold of him at the gate of Ludd and would kill him...» (Muslim)

Some prophets suffered from the disobedience and stubbornness of their followers. The children of Israel disobeyed Moses (ﷺ) after they had escaped from Pharaoh. When he left his people and went to the mountain for forty days to speak with Allah (ﷻ), he left his brother Aaron (ﷺ) in charge. In Moses' (ﷺ) absence, the people made a golden calf to worship.⁹ Aaron (ﷺ) tried to stop them, but they threatened his life and refused to listen to him.¹⁰

The father of the prophet Abraham (ﷺ) was an idol-worshiper.¹¹ When Abraham (ﷺ) gently tried to convince him to stop worshiping idols, his father threatened his life. Abraham (ﷺ) warned him of the punishment of Allah (ﷻ) but still continued to be respectful towards his father. When Abraham (ﷺ) broke the idols and incurred the wrath of his people, they rejected him and even tried to kill him by throwing him into a fire. However, Allah (ﷻ) cooled the flames, and he did not die.

﴿They said, 'Burn him and support your gods — if you are to act.' We [Allah] said, 'O fire, be coolness and safety upon Abraham.'﴾

(*Qur'an* 21: 68-69)

Then Allah (ﷻ) tested Abraham (ﷺ) again. His wife Sarah was unable to have children for many years, so with her encouragement, he married their Egyptian handmaiden, Hajar. She bore him Ishmael, the ancestor of Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) who is known as ‘the father of the Arabs’. Abraham (ﷺ) was instructed by Allah (ﷻ) to take Hajar and their baby Ishmael to the valley of Makkah and leave them there. Over the years, Abraham (ﷺ) visited them in Makkah, and then he had a vision in which Allah (ﷻ) commanded him to sacrifice his son. That would have been very challenging for anyone, but Abraham (ﷺ) was an obedient servant of Allah (ﷻ) and readily prepared to carry out the order.

﴿And when he reached with him [the age of] exertion, he said, ‘O my son, indeed I have seen in a dream that I [must] sacrifice you, so see what you think.’ He said, ‘O my father, do as you are commanded. You will find me, if Allah wills, of the steadfast.’﴾ (*Qur'an* 37: 102)

However, Allah sent a ram to be sacrificed instead and ransomed Ishmael (ﷺ). Abraham (ﷺ) later had another son, Isaac (ﷺ), by his wife Sarah; Isaac is considered the father of many prophets. Allah (ﷻ) promised to make a great nation from Ishmael (ﷺ); today the Arab population is in the hundreds of millions, and there are more than one billion Muslims widely spread throughout the world.

All the prophets suffered. There are more prophets than I mentioned, but these examples should suffice. The Qur'an names twenty-five prophets, while mentioning that there were thousands of prophets because Allah (ﷻ) sent guidance throughout history to every nation.

﴿And We certainly sent into every nation a messenger...﴾

(*Qur'an* 16: 36)

The last prophet is Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ),

﴿...[he is] the Messenger of Allah and seal [last] of the prophets...﴾

(*Qur'an* 33: 40)

We are told in the Qur'an that no other prophet will come after him until the Day of Judgment. Muhammad (ﷺ) was given the Qur'an as a final message for all of humankind, for he was sent as a universal prophet, although he appeared among the Arabs. Islam is a universal message, and the last revelation is the noble Qur'an.

﴿...This day I have perfected for you your religion and completed My favor upon you and have approved for you Islam as religion...﴾

(*Qur'an* 5: 3)

﴿And We have not sent you except comprehensively to mankind as a bringer of good tidings and a warner. But most of the people do not know.﴾

(*Qur'an* 34: 28)

Look at how patient the prophets were — how they and their followers grasped the truth and refused to let go even though they suffered persecution, hardship, loss and even death. Some prophets were actually killed by their people, but since they died as believers, they will inherit paradise. Allah (ﷻ) says:

﴿...Say, 'There have already come to you messengers before me with clear proofs and [even] that of which you speak. So why did you kill them, if you should be truthful?'﴾

(*Qur'an* 3: 183)

The story of the 'Companions of the Ditch' concerns some people who believed in Allah (ﷻ). Their king wished to have a young boy trained as a magician, but the boy chose to worship Allah (ﷻ) instead, and he was able to show the people that it was Allah who controlled all things. When the people refused to bow to their king and refused to have any other god except for Allah (ﷻ), this king had them all — men, women and children — thrown into a fiery ditch. Yet they continued saying, 'We affirm our faith in the Lord of this young man, we affirm our faith in the Lord of this young man, we affirm our faith in the Lord of this young man.'

﴿Destroyed [cursed] were the companions of the trench [containing] the fire full of fuel, when they were sitting near it and they, to what

they were doing against the believers, were witnesses. And they resented them not except because they believed in Allah, the Exalted in Might, the Praiseworthy, To whom belongs the dominion of the heavens and the earth. And Allah, over all things, is Witness. Indeed, those who have tortured the believing men and believing women and then have not repented will have the punishment of Hell, and they will have the punishment of the Burning Fire. Indeed, those who have believed and done righteous deeds will have gardens beneath which rivers flow. That is the great attainment.﴿ (Qur'an 85: 4-11)

Whenever we suffer hardship and complain, we should realize that our predecessors suffered much more than we do. We must learn to be as patient as they were. Even while I discuss my life and hardships, I know that this was much easier than the sufferings of the early Muslims and especially the 'Companions of the Ditch'.

If we really want to find and hold on to the truth, then we must be willing to face hardship and be ready to sacrifice. Truth is expensive but has a great reward: paradise.¹²

﴿But those who feared their Lord will have gardens beneath which rivers flow, abiding eternally therein, as accommodation from Allah. And that which is with Allah is best for the righteous.﴾

(Qur'an 3: 198)

Paradise is eternal, and no human there will ever be tired, sick, depressed or bored.

﴿[For them are] gardens of perpetual residence which they will enter. They will be adorned therein with bracelets of gold and pearls, and their garments therein will be silk. And they will say, 'Praise to Allah, who has removed from us [all] sorrow. Indeed, our Lord is Forgiving and Appreciative — He who has settled us in the home of duration [paradise] out of His bounty. There touches us not in it any fatigue, and there touches us not in it weariness [of mind].'﴾

(Qur'an 35: 33-35)

Life in paradise is more wonderful than we can ever imagine. The greatest pleasures are to see the Face of Allah (ﷻ), to be with Him, to be with the holy prophets and messengers of Allah and to praise Allah (ﷻ) with the angels.

﴿In a seat of honor near a Sovereign, Perfect in Ability.﴾

(*Qur'an* 54: 55)

Also, with every hardship, Allah (ﷻ) sends ease afterwards.

﴿For indeed, with hardship [will be] ease [relief]. Indeed, with hardship [will be] ease.﴾

(*Qur'an* 94: 5-6)

Allah (ﷻ) is with us with His knowledge and sight, and He helps us to bear whatever difficulties we face — as long as we call upon Him. Whenever I face adversity, I think of two things. One is that everything in life eventually passes, so whatever I am facing will eventually be over; thus, I must be patient and wait. The second is this verse from the Qur'an, in which I take comfort:

﴿Allah does not charge a soul except [with that within] its capacity. It will have [the consequence of] what [good] it has gained, and it will bear [the consequence of] what [evil] it has earned. 'Our Lord, do not impose blame upon us if we have forgotten or erred. Our Lord, and lay not upon us a burden like that which You laid upon those before us. Our Lord, and burden us not with that which we have no ability to bear. And pardon us; and forgive us; and have mercy upon us. You are our protector, so give us victory over the disbelieving people.'﴾

(*Qur'an* 2: 286)

Even as a Muslim, I still have my own trials and hardships. A spiritual journey can be more difficult than a physical journey. I evolved like the caterpillar that eventually changes into a beautiful butterfly. It took a lot of time, effort and patience to rewrite myself. I had to discover my wings and to fly from my heart and my soul. Though I passed through a myriad of difficulties, what eased my suffering and gave me strength to carry on and to be patient was my

belief in Allah (ﷻ) and my trust in Him. I go to Allah (ﷻ), and when I speak, He listens. When I cry out, He (ﷻ) is there to comfort me. He gives me all that I need to face hardships. I am assured of His Mercy. He calms my fears, and I find guidance with Him. Islam is the light that guides me to Allah (ﷻ). Allah (ﷻ) sent down the Qur'an as a guide to humankind. Our Creator knows us well, and He knows what we need. He tells us how we should live so we can avoid much suffering, if only we choose to listen and to obey.

Both good and bad people suffer hardships, but the successful ones are the believers who get relief in both this life and the next. One who follows Allah (ﷻ) will be happier and more relaxed because he or she believes in His (ﷻ) fairness and mercy. Islam tells us how to live in the best manner. Islam details every aspect of our lives in relation to food, clothing, economics, manners, how to deal with others, matters of worship, marriage, raising children, work and more. Everything imaginable is addressed in Islam.

Why did I choose the path of Islam? Islam filled my heart with light and opened my mind. It spoke to me in a logical way. Islam goes hand in hand with scientific knowledge. In fact, discoveries in modern science have actually proven statements from the Qur'an. Although it was revealed over one thousand four hundred years ago, it speaks of concepts that were not known until this past century. There certainly were no microscopes, telescopes or scientific equipment when it was revealed, yet the Qur'an is accurate in regard to scientific information.¹³

Islam also adds ethics and morality to one's life. I am closer to Allah (ﷻ) than ever before. He (ﷻ) is not only my Lord and Creator but also my Friend and Guardian. He (ﷻ) has indeed blessed me generously with so much. Every day I see the miracles of Allah (ﷻ) around me, and my heart knows it has grasped the truth and found peace and security while in the middle of life's tumultuous, stormy seas.

I suppose one could sum up most of my journey in the words of Robert Frost's poem *The Road Not Taken*.¹⁴ Frost discusses how we face decisions and dilemmas in our lives, as the narrator in the poem does. He made the decision to choose the harder and less traveled 'road', and this 'has made all the difference' in his life. My choices and decisions have led me to the path I am on, and I am satisfied with my choice.

However, dear reader, this path certainly was not easy to find or to follow. Nothing that is achieved easily can ever fully be appreciated. The following account will reveal to you my journey with both its ups and downs, although in some cases, I cannot discuss all the details out of respect for the privacy of those close to me. Maybe you will be surprised and wonder why an average American woman would embrace Islam. It is no big secret — so please read on and trace my journey on the path 'less traveled'.

MY LIFE'S JOURNEY

What could cause one to change his or her religion? What would drive an average, young white American woman to convert from Christianity to Islam? Out of curiosity, many people, both Muslims and non-Muslims, have asked me how and why I converted. All were eager to hear my story.

As a human being, forgetting about all the people around me, I know the true reality is Allah (ﷻ) (which is the name of the Creator in Arabic and refers to One God without partners) and my relationship with Him.

﴿Say, ‘He is Allah, [who is] One, Allah, the Eternal Refuge. He neither begets nor is born, nor is there to Him any equivalent.’﴾

(Qur'an 112: 1-4)

Before my conversion, I was filled with so many questions, like many other thinking people. I wanted to know: Who am I? What is my purpose? What should I do with my life? Why is it that some things in Christianity leave me with even more questions? Where can I find the answers?

My quest began at a very early age. Often, even young children begin asking those 'bizarre' little questions that put their parents on the spot — questions like: Why is the sky blue? What is death? Where did Grandma go to after she died? Where is heaven? How does God see us? These questions might drive parents crazy, but they demonstrate how humans are born with inquisitive natures and how they thirst for knowledge, clarity and truth, even as children.

As teenagers, the journey continues as adolescents want to know: What is my purpose? Why am I here? What career should I choose? Where do we go after death (because I am afraid to die)? During this time, they look for answers from their religion, from their parents, or from their society. If they cannot get satisfying answers, where do they turn? How does this affect the course of their lives?

I was not satisfied with the answers I got from the people around me, so my quest continued until I discovered the treasure of Islam. This discovery changed the course of my life.

As I start this book, I find it a little strange to be writing an autobiography at my young age. However, I have come to know that age is not measured by years but by experience. My life's experiences have made me wiser, but still I have a vast universe left to explore; even a whole lifetime can never teach us everything. I am still learning, just as a small child does, in this large, complicated world.

Nonetheless, even though my knowledge is limited, I want to share what I have discovered. The most valuable lesson I have learned in these past twenty years or so has been that of patience. Patience has been called a 'virtue', but it is more than that. It is a necessary skill that one must acquire to survive life and its hardships.

My life has been full of hardships, but these troubles have made me stronger. They have built my character and given me new vision. They have strengthened my faith, or rather my conviction, in Allah (ﷻ).

The religion of Islam emphasizes the need for patience; it could be considered a cornerstone of Islam. Allah (ﷻ) tells us that He rewards those who are patient.

﴿Say, 'O My servants who have believed, fear your Lord. For those who do good in this world is good, and the earth of Allah is spacious. Indeed, the patient will be given their reward without account [limit].'﴾ *(Qur'an 39: 10)*

﴿And be **patient**, for indeed, Allah does not allow to be lost the reward of those who do good.﴾ (Qur'an 11: 115)

﴿So be **patient** over what they say and exalt [Allah] with praise of your Lord before the rising of the sun and before its setting; and during periods of the night [exalt Him] and at the ends of the day, that you may be satisfied.﴾ (Qur'an 20: 130)

﴿So be **patient**, [O Muhammad]. Indeed, the promise of Allah is truth. And ask forgiveness for your sin and exalt [Allah] with praise of your Lord in the evening and the morning.﴾ (Qur'an 40: 55)

﴿And whoever is **patient** and forgives — indeed, that is of the matters [requiring] determination.﴾ (Qur'an 42: 43)

﴿So be **patient**, [O Muhammad], as were those of determination among the messengers and do not be impatient for them. It will be — on the Day they see that which they are promised — as though they had not remained [in the world] except an hour of a day. [This is] notification. And will [any] be destroyed except the defiantly disobedient people?﴾ (Qur'an 46: 35)

﴿So be **patient** with gracious patience.﴾ (Qur'an 70: 5)

﴿And be **patient** over what they say and avoid them with gracious avoidance.﴾ (Qur'an 73: 10)

﴿By time, indeed, mankind is in loss, except for those who have believed and done righteous deeds and advised each other to truth and advised each other to **patience**.﴾ (Qur'an 103: 1-3)

The Prophet (ﷺ) said: «None is more patient than Allah against the harmful saying. He hears from the people that they ascribe a son to Him, yet He gives them health and (supplies them with) provision.» (Bukhari)

Patience is indeed a source of calmness for the one who is in despair. I have learned patience, praise be to Allah (ﷻ), but I still could learn more.

The greatest change in my life, the real turning point, is when I converted (or reverted, as Islam is the natural born state of a child) to the religion of Islam. Islam is a religion of peace; 'Islam' and 'salâm', which means peace, both come from the same root word. The meaning of the word 'Islam' actually includes 'peace, purity, submission and obedience'.¹⁵ Islam means the Muslim's total submission to Allah (ﷻ). The search for truth is priceless. The journey for truth is a must for every soul, if one is to truly live as a feeling, thinking, reasoning human being.

Now, let us start at the beginning. I was born in a small town called Bluefield, which is situated on the border between Virginia and West Virginia. I lived on the Virginia side. This region is a beautiful, mountainous haven with a small population of generally kind, hospitable people. The winters are cold and snowy, while the fall is filled with the most beautifully 'painted' trees, waving in the wind the colors of red, orange, yellow and brown. I remember as a child raking the fallen leaves and throwing myself into them, listening to the crackling and crunching of dried up leaves. Spring in Bluefield also has its share of beauty; the nippy breeze in the morning mixes with the smell of dew and flowers. Summers bring lusciously green trees and grass with a few very hot days, though most are temperate. These beautiful, simple memories of Bluefield and its life remind me of the innocence and sweetness of childhood, yet I would never wish to go back to those years. Though life for me (as for any adult) has its everyday complex challenges, I am glad to be where I am now. I am truly pleased, satisfied and happy with the life Allah (ﷻ) has blessed me with. Still, when these sweet memories come to mind, they make me appreciate many aspects of my childhood, especially my parents.

I was born to Charles Winfrey and Lena Yost, both natives of Bluefield, and I grew up almost like an only child. I do have siblings, but my brother is fifteen years older than me, and my half-sister is twenty years older than me, and they lived far from me in other states.

Of course, they called, wrote and visited us when they could, but my experience was still like that of an only child. Despite the loneliness that I felt, it was advantageous to me because my mom could 'spoil' me and devote all of her time to me, which she did.

Despite my feistiness as a child and my rebelliousness as a teenager, I can look back and honestly say that my parents did a great job, and I am proud of them. Being a parent is not easy, as I learned after having my own children. My parents did the best they could.

My father was a good provider who carried out his duties. He was active and a hard worker, which made it very difficult when he had to retire. He was also very protective and strict, which, thank Allah (ﷻ), helped me to stay out of a lot of the trouble that some teenagers fall into. My father loved me, though he did not express it much. He had difficulties expressing his feelings (as did many men of his generation), but my father had a rough life. Even though he was sometimes hard on me or hurt my feelings, I forgive him because I realize that his circumstances were difficult. He was a good father and I love him very much, though his one great flaw was his quick, boiling temper. He did have a kind heart and could empathize with people; he could be giving and thoughtful. He was a complex man, and my mother really understood him best.

Recently, I met with my brother Doug, and we discussed his feelings for my father; he said that he used to think that Dad was too tough on him, but upon reflection, he realized that Dad had taught him 'to be responsible and to work very hard'. In other words, Dad taught him how to be a real man. I do remember my father working very hard to provide for his family and teaching us about work ethics, honesty, and pride in one's work.

When my father was fourteen years old, his father died. His older sisters were already married, but he had to go to work to take care of his mother and younger sister. As a result, he was not able to finish school. It was during World War II, and he went to work in a

shipyard. He was drafted into the army at the age of sixteen (because they thought he was eighteen). I have a photo from his early army days; my father looked very handsome. He earned the rank of Sergeant and was tasked with training other men. While in the military, he suffered an injury when he was being transported on a ship, and this injury would affect his health as he got older. Later, my father learned to fly and would sometimes pilot a small plane. Unfortunately, I never got to fly with him, but I am sure that he enjoyed flying among the clouds and leaving the chaos of the world below. He was eventually able to finish his high school education through the army, and I am very proud of him for accomplishing this.

My father had been married once before and had a daughter, so I have a half-sister, Mary Kathryn. She grew up with her mother, and my father was not able to see her for many years, but later she started visiting us. I remember her playing with me when I was a little girl and painting my fingernails. When I was in the third grade, she and her son moved in with us for a while. My nephew is the same age as me, so we had a sort of 'sibling rivalry', but we got along well, too. It was a happy time, though short; then she went back home. I did not see Mary Kathryn again for many years, although we stayed in contact by writing and e-mailing. I did get to see her a few years ago, though, and we had a very pleasant visit. We genuinely do have some things in common, and I found my sister to be very sweet and caring. I had a chance to meet my grown-up nephew as well, and the visit really made me happy.

To some extent, I missed out on having a normal relationship with my brother and sister due to our great age differences. However, we maintain a good relationship even though I cannot see them often because we all live in different places. I saw my brother and his family recently, and they all respect me even though I have changed my religion. We had fun together and enjoyed each other's company.

When my brother Doug was at home and I was a small child, he used to spoil me and take me wherever he went. He used to carry me around on his shoulders. He was proud of his little sister. I was in his first wedding as a flower girl. Unfortunately, that marriage ended in divorce. I wore Islamic dress at his second wedding, which was a shock for the guests, but my brother treated me just the same, and I was very happy about that. Doug is a great guy, a kind-hearted gentleman, and a very giving person. We used to e-mail each other and try to keep in touch, and now we are able to see each other more often. The death of my father seems to have made us desire to be even closer.

I have a lot of good memories of my brother, especially when I was older and he used to come to visit. I remember going to the football game of our school's team and how I cheered so loudly with him. My brother is very loving; he always used to remember my birthday and other occasions, and he used to mail me gifts. Even though there is quite an age gap between us, we still have a lot in common (probably due to having the same parents). I am the writer, and he is the painter. He is a very talented artist, but he does not practice like he used to, so I am trying to encourage him to paint again. I have some drawing skills but never practiced in this field; I was always too busy with other things. Doug used to write some poetry in his earlier years, and I used to sit and read the copies he had left at home. I think that if he had concentrated more on writing, he could have become a talented writer. I suppose that one cannot do everything, and life sometimes takes turns that cause us to fall into certain jobs and professions.

I am very happy that both Doug and Mary Kathryn are still close to me despite the fact that I am now a Muslim. In many cases like mine, family members abandon their loved ones. Why is this? If you love and care for someone, why would you leave him or her just because of a change in religion? It does not make sense to me, but human

nature is like this; it causes us to do a lot of things that do not make sense. Maybe the convert's loved ones think that by ostracizing him or her, they will convince the convert to give up the new religion and way of life, but they should keep in mind that this might actually make him or her more obstinate. If a person sincerely converted from his or her own convictions and from the heart, is truly faithful to their religion and believes that he or she has indeed grasped the truth, then the convert will never turn back.

My father was twenty-eight years old when he met my mother, and they only knew each other for three months before they were married. They remained married to each other for over forty years, until my father passed away a few years ago. I have some old photos from my parents' early years together; they were a nice-looking couple. My father was quite handsome, and my mother was beautiful; she looked like a film star of the 1940s. My mother finished high school and then went to work. Her dream was to become a nurse, but she never got to fulfill that dream. She would have made a great nurse because she has such a caring, helpful nature. She continued to work some after her marriage, but she spent most of her years at home with my brother and me. When I was in junior high school, she began to work again by helping my father with his businesses. She was a patient woman — with all of us.

My father had a variety of jobs after he left the army. He was a self-taught businessman who owned several different businesses. He was a very ambitious and intelligent man. For years, my parents did well financially, but suddenly, due to ill health and other reasons, my father's work began to suffer. After that, I had to watch his health decline; an air of worry and depression filled most of my high school years. From this and other events, I have come to know that life is not easy; it is a challenge, and our circumstances can change overnight.

My father's youngest sister, my Aunt Alice, took a close interest in me during my teenage years. She used to write me letters and gave

me good advice about concentrating on my college studies and not thinking of boys. Aunt Alice wanted me to be a successful career woman. One time she was able to visit me when I performed in a play; I was so happy that she could see me. She supported my piano playing, singing and acting more than my other aunts did. She truly believed that I could make my dreams come true, but she also advised me to study and gain a marketable skill.

When I became a Muslim, I disrupted every plan that my whole family had for me. Aunt Alice, for one, was very upset, and I did not hear from her for a long time. My family tried to get me to change back, but I would not. To this day, it hurts that my aunt could so easily turn her back on me and abandon me. I think she believed that I had brazenly defied her advice, and that I had insulted her religion (she was a religious Christian). I do appreciate and remember all that she did for me, but my religious choice was not aimed at destroying her or anyone else. I did this for myself and for my own soul. I did this to find the truth and to be set free. Some of my family members do not understand why I chose this path, but I hope that they will one day understand or at least come to accept my decision.

Luckily, I was able to see Aunt Alice a couple of years ago, and she really was kind to me and concerned for me. My heart was delighted to see her and to know that she had finally accepted me despite my religion. I know she loves me very much. Aunt Alice told me that she wanted me to be happy and to have a good life. I told her that I was quite happy and not to worry about me. I was also fortunate enough to see my other aunts, my father's older sisters, a couple of years ago. They got to meet my husband for the first time, too. The members of my family who met my husband seemed pleased with him and liked him; they enjoyed my children as well. Aunt Frances passed away from leukemia shortly after I saw her, so it was a blessing to get to visit her.

Unfortunately, I did not get to see my father before he died. This, and the fact that he never met my husband and my children, saddens me.

I do still have good relationships with many family members. One is my mother's sister, Aunt Clara, who is a wonderful and caring person. She always writes to me and never scolded me for my decision. Aunt Clara accepted my conversion in the beginning better than my mother did, although she is also a religious Christian. She has always been kind and loving towards me. I even have a couple of cousins who write me regularly, and we have a good relationship. My being a Muslim has not affected my relationships with them. They are indeed open-minded.

Going back to my childhood, I know that I was not the easiest child. As a baby, I walked at the age of seven months. I was very active and used to climb out of the playpen and the baby bed. Once I followed a neighbor up the street while my mother was busy carrying canned goods into the basement. When my mother turned around, I was gone, and she became hysterical. Our neighbor discovered me behind her after she had reached the top of the hill. She called my mother, before my mother called the police, and told her that she would bring me back to the house. I was a courageous little child, almost fearless. (Just like my sons, who are now paying me back for driving my mother crazy. I have two boys who are only a year and a couple of months apart, so I have 'double trouble').

As a child, I was full of questions. When Doug was young, my mother would ask him to do something, and he would immediately do it. I, on the other hand, used to ask, "Why?" If I received a satisfactory answer, then I would do it quickly. My parents were unnerved by this. "Do it because I said so!" was the reaction I often received. Although I was a little stubborn, I was still a well-behaved child, and when we were outside the home, I was very obedient. All that my mother needed to do was to give me that 'look', and I would

straighten up in a heartbeat. While other children ran around during church services, I sat quietly beside my mother and actually listened to the sermon, even at the age of three; if I got bored, I would doodle on some paper. I knew that if I went on a rampage like those other children, my mother would spank me. This taught me patience and endurance. Also, it was beneficial for me to actually hear the sermon. I learned to respectfully listen to others, which is something that some youth do not understand at all, not to mention some adults.

My mother was the pillar of my education. “The mother is a school” is a well-known saying in the Arab world, and this is so true. My mother is the one who unknowingly led me to Islam. She taught me moral lessons that have stayed with me. From the time I was in the cradle, she taught me about God and the Ten Commandments. I knew not to lie or to steal, and I was introduced to the concepts of heaven and hell and of good and evil. At an early age, I learned good manners and good behavior. I learned that bad behavior resulted in punishment, while people were pleased with good behavior, which usually was rewarded.

My mother used to read Bible stories to me. I had a very large picture book with stories from the Bible in it, and I used to enjoy reading them. I even had a pop-up figure book for the story of Noah’s Ark, which I loved to play with. My mother and I also used to watch a lot of television together, especially classic films with actors like Charlton Heston, John Wayne, Cary Grant, Clark Gable and many others. She used to sit with me and explain what was wrong and what was right. I enjoyed watching action and police films with my parents, too, because my father loved action films.

Growing up, I saw a lot of violence on television. The debate continues over the effect of this on children, and many think that it is harmful, but I do not think that it is completely bad. I think I turned out all right. I do think it needs to be limited though. Television in general should be limited, in my opinion, because there are so many

other activities that children should do, like reading and sports. One cannot hide the whole world from a child. However, violent films should not be viewed all the time, and some films may need a parent's explanation. I had my mother's explanation most of the time. I enjoyed watching the good guys catch the bad guys and seeing that justice was always done. (It is unfortunate that real life cannot have justice all of the time). This is probably where I get my sense of justice. Two of the things I love most in life are truth and justice; they are a part of my character.

The irony of my life is that as a child, I was ill a lot and missed many days of school, so I could not read until the second grade; however, I ended up graduating from a university and earning a Master of Arts degree in English Literature. Due to my severe allergies and susceptibility to illness (until I took a series of injections for six years to force my body to tolerate the things I was allergic to), I missed seventy days from the first grade. Even when I did go to school, no one bothered to help me learn to read; they just passed me on to the second grade. I was unable to read, though I dearly wanted to know how. My mother thought I was being stubborn about reading and did not want to learn. I was blessed with a terrific, caring second grade teacher, Mrs. Nash, who talked to my mother about my situation. I had been placed in the lower reading group in order to catch up. She asked my mother to help her with me, and she sent home books for Mom to help me read. Between Mrs. Nash at school and Mom at home, I was able to read very well after six weeks.

The teachers wanted to put me in an advanced reading group, but my mother knew I was shy and sometimes nervous. She did not want to ruin the progress we had made, so she told them to keep me in the same group for the rest of the year. At the beginning of the next year, they asked me if I would like to join the advanced group, and I readily agreed. Allah, the Exalted, the Almighty, generously saved me. I could have fallen between the cracks of the system, but then a

caring teacher and a caring parent rescued me. I have a lot to be thankful for.

My mother always helped me to study for tests and to memorize lines for plays. She helped me in Spanish without even knowing the language. She used to give me words in English, and I would give the meanings and the words in Spanish; she guessed at their correctness by my pronunciation.

Every week she took me to the public library, and I would bring home stacks of books. Sometimes, I used to read one or two books a day. I read stories about animals and mysteries, like the *Nancy Drew* series and books by Agatha Christie. I always liked science fiction; one of my favorite books was *Dune* by Frank Herbert. I also used to read the stories of King Arthur and Merlin. I even loved reading classics like *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea*. I used to read and watch television at the same time, and I was able to follow both; sometimes I still do this, and people find it strange.

My mother played games with me, especially cards. We used to watch television while playing the card game 'rummy', and I got proficient enough that I was able to win most of the time. We had good times together playing games like Uno and Chinese Checkers, too.

It was my habit to study with either the television or the cassette player on, although I do not allow my own children to do so. I did not know how to study with the room quiet; I preferred noise. Now, as an adult, I prefer to read in a quiet environment, which is a complete switch.

I began to learn the clarinet in the fifth grade and took piano lessons in the sixth grade. I loved music very much. I was in the school band, and I sang in the church choir. I used to sing for two hours a day and play the piano for another two hours a day. My parents did not have to force me to practice; in fact, my father sometimes begged me to stop practicing because he wanted peace

and quiet. I had once considered becoming a professional pianist, but I loved singing even more, so I thought about a career in singing. Once I got to the university and was exposed to opera music, I considered becoming an opera singer. I used to sing in Italian, Latin and German. I grew to appreciate the complexities and the beauty of such music. My mother liked opera music as well, but my father was not that fond of it.

My mother supported me in all of my activities. She is a great mother, and I am very proud of her. She is self-sacrificing, kind, merciful, strong, compassionate and intelligent. She supported me in whatever I wished to choose as a career, although I know that she would have liked for me to have gone into acting and music. My father had dreams for me to become a physician, but I did not want that, although I do like science and am interested in topics dealing with medicine and technology.

My father and mother wanted the best for me, as most parents do for their children. They both worked hard for me and sacrificed for my well-being. My mother sat up with me many nights when I was ill from asthma and allergies. Of course, this is the role expected of a mother. She used to take me to the doctor weekly for allergy injections, and she would always buy me some small gift such as a coloring book, a little doll, or a book. She spoiled me in some ways, but she was strict in that she always expected good behavior.

I remember my father playing baseball with me and taking me to a baseball game once. He played with me whenever he could, but he spent long hours at work. Most of my time was spent with my mother until I reached high school; then my father spent more time at home, and he was ill during my last year of high school.

Both my parents wanted me to achieve success. They wanted me to be famous, although they did not say so directly. My mother wanted me to live out her childhood dreams. As a child, she had wanted to become a ballerina or an ice-skater, and as a teenager, she

used to dance. My father, on the other hand, liked boxing. It's a good thing he did not wish that for me, although if I could have studied Tae Kwondo then, I probably would have. I actually got the chance to learn Tae Kwondo while in Ghana, and I was able to earn my green belt. I trained with my sons in the beginning, but I had to stop when I got pregnant with my daughter. It is great exercise, and I still practice on my own.

During my youth, I had my own dreams and aspirations. I wanted to become a pianist, then a singer, and then an actress. At one time, I thought I could do all three, which was really ambitious. When I was in high school, I was interested in ancient Egypt and considered becoming an archaeologist. I enjoy research work; I remember doing a long research paper on the ancient Egyptians and mummies. My paper ended up being thirty-six pages long, and I turned it in three weeks early. The teacher was impressed; I guess her eyes hurt after the long read, too. I changed my mind about becoming an archaeologist, but I still like reading about this subject and other events in history. I even enjoy reading about technology and medical research. It is good to have some knowledge about many different areas; this makes one well-rounded. In the end, though, I think that it is best to choose one main interest and train intensely to become the best in that field. The other subjects can be like hobbies when there is spare time.

At one time, I did believe that I would be famous, but now fame means nothing to me. Actually, when I think about the challenges and the loss of privacy that come with fame, it seems to me that it would be annoying. I do what I do now because I like it. I am still ambitious; I like to realize my goals, and I strive for excellence, but I do not care if I ever achieve fame. I am happy with myself and my life, and this is what really matters. I think that my aspiration for fame at an early age is common among teenagers. I also think that I just wanted to make my parents proud of me and to grab more of their

attention. At least my goals have changed into something better; I do hope to benefit those around me, and I would like to live my life as the playwright George Bernard Shaw described:

I want to be thoroughly used up when I die. For the harder I work the more I live. I rejoice in life for its own sake. Life is no brief candle to me. It's a sort of splendid torch which I've got to hold up for the moment and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations.¹⁶

I began writing poetry and short stories in high school, but it was a hobby. I never seriously considered writing as a career until after I had completed a Bachelor of Arts degree in English Literature. Since high school, I have enjoyed literature and drama due to my inspirational teacher Mrs. Kensinger. She opened the door for me, so I owe her many thanks.

I was a very timid, quiet child with few friends. Later on, my classmates considered me to be 'brainy'. I suppose I was shy due to the fact that I was like an only child. Whenever Doug and Mary Kathryn were able to visit, they spoiled me with attention, but usually I had no one to play with. My neighbors' children had all grown up, so there were no other children in my neighborhood. Eventually, we got new neighbors. Sandra was a little younger than me, and she would come to play with me occasionally. Also, I had a younger cousin, Tanya, who lived a couple of blocks away; she would come over every week or so to play. For the most part, I grew up around adults, doing serious adult activities, although I did sometimes play with Barbie dolls and toy cars. I had a very extensive collection of up to three hundred dolls — antique, porcelain, foreign and unique dolls. I did not play with them, though; I preserved them in plastic covers.

Eventually, I pushed myself to outgrow my shyness. In high school, I forced myself into performing in the choir, participating in

dramatic interpretations, and singing solo during some shows. I also became more active in church during this time. I sang in the choir, did some drama activities with the youth group and occasionally played piano on Sundays. In the last two years of high school, I began to develop myself. Before that, I had been very shy, sitting in the back of the class as quiet as a mouse and blushing when anyone spoke to me. It took a lot of work to learn to socialize and to enjoy my hobbies and interests in public. Finally, I gained the confidence that I had been keenly seeking.

In high school, I did not plan very well for a place in the university. Others were preparing for college while I was having dreams in the clouds. My guidance counselor did not push me enough in that direction, and my mother did not know much about the subject. On my own, I ended up at the last minute deciding to attend a local college. I thank Allah (ﷻ) for guiding me to this decision, because I believe that I benefited greatly from it.

Before that, my close companion Donna and I had considered going together to an acting school in New York. Donna was a great friend — honest, charming, intelligent, polite and one of the few people who understood me. She did not laugh at my dreams as some of my other friends did; we even shared the same dreams. We used to write stories together, and I used to read her poems. She was quite gifted. Sadly, at the age of sixteen, Donna passed away after a blood clot burst in her brain. This was believed to have been caused by her falling off a horse and bumping her head the week before. She seemed to be fine afterwards and did not see a doctor. She had a headache one night, so she took aspirin and went to sleep. The next morning, she did not wake up. That is when I received a terrible phone call from her neighbor's daughter Cyndi, who gave me the bad news. I was shocked. I could not believe it at first; I refused to believe it. I thought it was a horrible joke, but unfortunately it was a shattering reality.

Like most of the students in our school, I attended Donna's funeral. I thought that I would be able to be strong, but I cried. It felt so lonely not to have her calling me every evening. Indeed, I had lost a great friend. This experience caused me to become more serious about my life. I awakened to the reality that no one knows when he or she will die. Death does not differentiate between a young or an old person. I spent one month shedding tears and another month feeling depressed. I felt alone and misunderstood without my best friend. My other friends were around me, but they were young and inexperienced in such a situation and did not know how to comfort me. When someone that young dies, does anyone really know the correct words to say to someone?

I finally was able to pull myself together and to rely on God to comfort me. I used to pray and ask him to take care of Donna. I used to pray and ask for God to give me strength. I knew from my beliefs that it was fate, and that it had been her time to die, but it still did not make it any easier. I missed her terribly, and my life changed. I studied harder and kept myself busy with school projects and activities. I began to write even more than I had before. I poured my feelings into my writings, and I ended up writing a whole selection of poems about death.

Around this same time came the death of my paternal grandmother, Cora Winfrey. She had been ill for some time, due to several strokes that had left her paralyzed from the waist down. She had been such a strong, hard-working woman. It was difficult to watch her decline and to see how dependent she was on the machine that they were using to suck out the fluid filling her lungs. She was eighty-nine years old and a fighter. I watched my grandmother die in a hospital bed. I was beside her when she gasped her last breath, when she ceased fighting and just seemed to surrender to death. I could not cry at first; the tears were locked, and my throat was choked. Everyone else started crying, but I only cried silently to

myself. My aunts were comforting each other, and my mother was comforting my poor father, who had loved his mother very much.

I still have pleasant memories of Grandma Winfrey. We used to play card games like 'Old Maid', and she used to play ball with me. I remember that she kept a dish filled with peppermint candies and caramel filled treats; when we went to her house, she always gave me candy to eat. Grandmothers are very nice.

I remember my mother's mother, Elizabeth Yost, with fond memories, too. She used to live beside my Aunt Clara, but far from us. Every summer she used to come to stay with us for two or three months. When I was a child, we used to do some gardening work with my mother. I used to listen to her stories of her childhood and laugh. She was famous for her fried apple pies. Grandma Yost began to teach me to embroider, but we never completed these lessons because she suffered a stroke and lost sight in one eye. After that, it was hard for her to continue sewing. I still remember walking with her to the nearby shop to buy ice cream in the summer. During the last ten years or so of her life, her memory was affected; she remembered the past vividly, but forgot the present after only a few minutes. It is very sad to see people decline in this manner.

Grandma Yost was a religious Christian who was very kind, generous and sweet, and she liked helping people. Due to her Pentecostal Christian upbringing, she could be quite strict; she dressed conservatively, did not like dancing and did not even drink coffee. My mother had felt pulled between her mother and her father, who let her dance and 'spoiled' her. What was so wonderful about my grandmother is that when I wore my Islamic dress and my own mother was upset about it, my grandmother told me I looked beautiful. She was happy to see me covered.

Grandma Yost had been ill for years. After she broke her hip and it did not heal well, she finally ended up in a nursing home, where she had constant care. Aunt Clara visited her daily and really tried hard to

look after her, even while she was in the nursing home. Grandma had had several strokes. Finally, the last one weakened her, and not long afterwards, she passed away. This was really hard on my mother and aunt, as they loved their mother very much.

Death was becoming quite a familiar visitor. I had seen death for the first time at the age of three, when I went with my mother to see her father, my Grandpa Yost. He was very ill and dying, so they snuck me into the hospital to see him. I was worried about him, but Mom thought that he would get better. She told me that he would be well soon, but instead he died. He kept coughing due to his asthma, and in the 1970s, medicine for that disease was not as advanced as it is today; he died due to his asthma. It was hard for me to understand death at my age, but I knew that he was not coming back. I vaguely remember him spoiling me and calling me his 'queen bee'. I still have a cowgirl cup that he gave me at the age of three, which holds special meaning for me. It is strange how objects can somehow generate feelings and memories.

Then my mother's uncle became sick and was admitted to the hospital. He was not seriously ill, so they expected him to get well soon. I told my mother that "hospitals kill people," because it appeared that way to me when my grandfather died in the hospital. I told her that the hospital would kill her uncle, too, but she said that he would come home soon. When he suddenly died, I told her, "See! Hospitals kill people." After that, I was afraid of hospitals until I was old enough to understand better.

I was preoccupied with death as a child, and I drove my mother crazy. I was so afraid that my mother would die and leave me that I used to have nightmares about it. If she fell asleep on the sofa, I would stand next to her to see if I could see or hear her breathing. If I was not sure, I would wake her up just to confirm that she was still alive. My poor mother suffered during that time; for one thing, she could get no rest. Eventually, this fear of mine passed, but later, after

my Grandma Winfrey and best friend Donna died, I became more conscious again of life and death. I began searching for myself and my purpose, so I began questioning everything around me.

Donna used to write more than I did, but after her death, I began writing more, as if something from her had been transferred to me. It was just a little strange... Somehow, I spoke with a new voice. I suppose that writing became an outlet for my grief. I published some poems while still in high school.

I began to question the people around me about religion. I was beginning to awaken, and I needed answers. I wanted to be close to God but did not know how, although I was praying and reading the Bible daily. I was afraid of going to hell, and death was always so close. I wanted peace, security and comfort. I always had difficulty with the issue of the trinity, and I wanted the truth.

My father was not a religious man, but he strongly believed in God and had sound moral principles. He was also questioning religion, though he kept his questions to himself. His background was Baptist, but he read books from other religious groups, in particular the Mormons. Though my mother's family was divided, she had mostly been brought up as a Presbyterian. She and I attended the Presbyterian Church, and my father used to accompany us. Later, I would go on to attend a Baptist college. One might say, "What a mixture!" It was, but they shared the same beliefs in God and the Ten Commandments. Yet among all of these denominations, I still could not find the answers I needed.

MY CONVERSION

*J*t was around the age of sixteen that I was trying to become closer to God. I wanted to serve Him, to obey Him and to have a personal relationship with Him. I read the Bible daily and prayed. I was basically a 'good girl'. Still, I felt unrest in my heart. I could not sleep well at times; I was troubled and confused. The preacher said to ask for things in the name of Jesus (¶), but all my life I had only prayed to and said 'God'. My concept as a child was of one God; I prayed to the Creator of the universe. When I was told to ask in the name of Jesus (¶), I tried it, but I felt even worse. I had been raised with the idea of a trinity; as a child I had accepted it, while still directing my prayers to the Creator. Now that I was older, I could not understand the trinity, and I started to ask questions like: How can three be one? How can God die on the cross? If He is God, then he cannot die. Who would take care of the universe in His absence? Why does God need children? If we pray to 'God the father' and 'God the son', then why not pray to the 'Holy Spirit' too — is it not part of the trinity? These questions angered my mother, who told me just to believe because it was the truth. I could not accept this. I wanted some evidence, some logical explanation, some answers.

During this time of great questioning, I began my studies at the local four-year Baptist College. I started out as a drama major, since I loved acting, then I was persuaded to change my major to music. I stayed with music (piano and voice) for a year, and then I switched to English Literature. I had enough credits to complete a minor in music. I still worked on plays, and I still took voice and piano while

continuing to perform in concerts. I was led to go into English for job security reasons, and I found that I liked it. I still wanted a chance in music and acting, though; I had not yet abandoned these dreams. I was writing poetry and short stories, but writing at that time was just a hobby.

I took some religion courses, not only because they were required but also because I hoped to have some questions answered. In fact, my questions actually increased after these courses. The professor admitted there were contradictions in the Bible but said, “We accept it as a whole to be the truth.” I began questioning: “If there is a contradiction here and one there and so forth, then how do I know what is true and what is false?” I could not accept this. I wanted the truth — but where could I find it? I continued reading the Bible and searching.

I also continued studying and overloaded myself with courses (usually twenty-one credit hours per semester), so I completed my bachelor’s degree in two and a half years. I wanted to finish early and begin working to earn my own money, because I was depending on scholarships and financial aid. Around this time, my father’s health began to decline considerably, and then my mother’s health began to decline as well. It was a stressful time for all of us, and I came to depend on myself at an early age. University was a time for discovering myself and what I really wanted out of life.

I had moved on campus by then. I went home weekly to see my parents, and I called every couple of days to check on them. Mom used to come and see the performances of my plays. Dad came once and enjoyed it very much. I remember well the play that he attended; it was one of my favorites. I portrayed an older woman who was the head of the Canadian Red Cross during World War II. My character was very hard on the other women and actually quite mean, so when my father saw my character, he really laughed. He was proud to see me on stage, although he never actually told me so. Both my parents

were proud to see me doing my activities, and this made me very happy. In those days, my father did not go out much due to the strokes that he had suffered. I felt so sorry for him as I watched him gradually get weaker. He suffered a lot of pain. I was so used to seeing him strong and very active in his work. I know it was very difficult for him and for my mother, who looked after him. My mother has also had her share of illnesses, but she has patiently endured. I think of her often and worry about her.

When we see the elderly and all that they suffer, we must be thankful for good health and realize that health is really a treasure. Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) advised us: «Take benefit of five before five: your youth before your old age, your health before your sickness, your wealth before your poverty, your free time before your preoccupation, and your life before your death.» (a sound hadith recorded by al-Hâkim and al-Bayhaqi)

Later, as a new Muslim, at the age of nineteen, I was seeking support in my new religion. I wanted someone to teach me the Arabic language and to teach me more about Islam. I felt alone because my Christian friends did not understand why I had converted. At that time, I still had not told my parents that I was a Muslim. I knew a Muslim man at the university who seemed nice, so I decided to marry him. Admittedly, I rushed into the situation, as I really knew nothing about this man. Unfortunately, after some time together, we discovered that we were incompatible. After our son was born and we were unable to reconcile, we divorced. My son is always in my heart, although I have not been able to see him for a long time because he lives with his father in another country. I pray that Allah (ﷻ) will guide him and always take care of him. Indeed, the loss of my son was extremely difficult for me, and this was definitely an examination from Allah (ﷻ). I was patient, and I am still being patient, though it is not easy.

When I left America to live abroad, my mother was heart-broken. At the time, I did not realize how much it would affect her. Later, as the years passed, I have come to realize just how hard it was for her to lose her only daughter, the pride and joy of her life. She always worries about me. She sacrificed so much for me during her life. She took care of me and raised me well, and I do appreciate everything. When my father passed away, I could not go to her right away, because I was pregnant with one of my sons. I am sure it was very difficult for my mother not to see me. I was able to visit her a few times throughout the years, and I have recently moved back to the United States, which is a comfort for her. I wish my mother could have visited me while I was living abroad, because I wanted to show her all the beautiful things in the countries where I lived. I wanted her to see how happy her grandchildren and I are with our lifestyle, and how our lifestyle and values remain the same, no matter where we live. My mother did come to visit us here in the United States, and she enjoyed her stay. My children love their grandmother very much.

I have lived in Jordan, Sudan and Ghana with my current husband. We moved to Sudan and Ghana due to his work. All of these moves were exciting and scary at the same time. I was happy just to be going with my husband, and it is always interesting to see other people and cultures; however, these places were unknown to me, which caused me some apprehension. I used the Internet to do research about the countries before these moves, so that I would have some idea of what to expect and what I needed to do to prepare.

Shortly after our wedding, we moved to Sudan, in Northeast Africa. It has a diverse population; it is a Muslim country that is considered to be both African and Arab. Despite Sudan's difficulties, it had a quiet, slow-paced life and a strange beauty. We lived in Sudan during the time they had the war with the South of Sudan. We lived in the capital, Khartoum, so we did not actually experience the war; it was contained in the South, and we only saw it on TV. We did

see many of the refugees and immigrants from South Sudan who were looking for work while trying to learn the Arabic language, since they spoke their own tribal languages.

What I found difficult were the daily hardships like constant power outages, very dusty weather most of the year, lack of water when the power was off (because the water pump could not operate), and intense dry heat. When it did rain, there were no gutters to drain off the rain, so sometimes there were 'pools' of water. Also, there were a lot of beggars, and life was not easy. From what I have heard, life in Sudan has improved a lot since then, and they even have a large shopping mall now.

After only a few years in Sudan, we moved to Ghana, which is located in West Africa, off the coast of the Atlantic Ocean. We spent only a few years there, too. Life in Ghana was a little easier than in Sudan, in regards to electricity, water and so forth.

I am very fortunate to have had such opportunities to travel. My mother always wanted to travel but never did much; she would have loved to have travelled as I did.

My parents and I did get a chance to visit the Dominican Republic. When I was in the sixth grade, one of my cousins married a young woman from there, so we went for six days for the wedding. It is a quaint little island in the Caribbean, where the people speak Spanish. I remember how blue the sea was and how I collected seashells. I remember the elaborate wedding party and how I was amazed to see the little children drinking champagne at the party (something that is common there). I remember my friend Vivian, who wrote to me a couple of times in Spanish. I have a lot of good memories with my parents; these will be cherished forever.

Later, I studied Spanish mainly because of my cousin's wife and her family. I have since discovered that I like learning languages in general. Of course, that requires time to study, so it is hard for me at the present time since I have small children, but I still try to make time.

While I was pursuing my Bachelor's degree, I had some difficult times in my college. I had some 'friends' who betrayed me and others who did naughty things. My innocence and trusting nature allowed me to believe that other people were as good as me. My heart was kind and soft, and sometimes this led me into troubles. Somehow, Allah (ﷻ) protected me during those years from many harmful situations and events, especially considering some of the people I knew. My mother had raised me in an atmosphere of truthfulness, and I was actually quite naive when I reached college. I had to learn the hard way not to trust everyone, but I finally did learn this lesson. Years later, I went to the opposite extreme and tended to always be suspicious at first. One actually needs to be somewhere in the middle, which is what I am trying to achieve now.

During this time, my questioning resounded in the background like a distant bell, always reminding me to seek answers. I met some Arab students who were Muslims, but most were not practicing their religion; some were nice, and some were not. There were a few practicing Muslims among them. They were taking some extra classes at my college while attending another full-time college. Some of them were drinking and using drugs. It is a good thing I did not take them as examples of Islam; sadly, they were the complete opposite of what Muslims should be. Finally, I met some new students, not overly religious but decent, who mentioned Islam to me. I was curious, for I knew nothing about Islam. I wanted to learn more about these Arabs because I found their culture, music, food and language very interesting. This opened the path for me to learn something about Islam.

I went to the library to research Islam; then I kept bothering these students until they brought me some books in English about Islam. I even went out and bought an English translation of the meanings of the noble Qur'an. Candice, my friend and roommate, was a strict Christian whose father was a Christian minister. I was afraid to let her

see me reading about Islam, so I kept these books hidden in my desk, and I used to wait until she slept at night before reading them. I read only by a small lamp beside my bed, and in the early hours of the morning, I was engrossed in discovering the basics of Islam. I wanted more and more knowledge. I was like a thirsty, lost traveler in the desert, waiting to drink from the fountain of truth. I wanted to quench the thirst of my soul. I read the translation of the Qur'an, and its words sang to my heart.

Still, I was afraid. I was afraid of the people around me, afraid of rejection, afraid that my parents would disown me, and afraid that all my friends would leave me. So I waited, but I waited restlessly. I could not sleep well. I kept myself busy with my homework and other activities, and at night I would find comfort and ease with God in the books I was reading.

I wanted to be sure that I had really found the truth, so I begged God, the Creator, to show me the truth and to guide me. I had read that a Muslim prays five times a day, but I did not know exactly how the Islamic prayer should be performed because I had only a beginner's book. It said five prayers a day though, so I began praying five times a day, guessing at the times. I would kneel at my bedside in the way I knew from Christianity, with my hands clasped and my head bowed, begging God for His guidance. Of course, after becoming a Muslim, I learned the correct way to pray, which involves standing, bowing, and prostrating to God. It may seem strange to some non-Muslims, but this is the way our Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) taught us to pray, and it is the way the other prophets used to pray, too. The Old Testament describes how Moses and Aaron (peace be upon them) 'fell upon their faces' to worship God.¹⁷

My contemplating and praying went on for five months or so until the Islamic fasting month of Ramadan. In this month, Muslims fast from dawn until sunset daily. This entails abstaining from all food

and drink, smoking, and sexual relations with one's spouse during the hours of the fast. On another level, one should also avoid bad words, bad deeds and gossip, because these actually can nullify the fast. One should try not to get angry during the time of fasting. Fasting is actually a means of purifying the heart, the soul and the mind, as well as helping us to learn tolerance, patience and how to avoid temptations. It is also a way for us to gain some understanding of how the hungry and destitute feel when they cannot find food to eat. We learn to empathize with them. During Ramadan, one is strongly encouraged to give charity and to do other good deeds. At the end of the month, Muslims give an obligatory charity consisting of a certain amount of grain to be given to those who are in need, so that they can prepare a hearty meal to celebrate the completion of the month of fasting.

During this time, I was introduced to an American Muslim, Melva, who wore the *hijab* (Islamic dress for women). Almost every evening, after eating a meal to break my fast, I went to her home to discuss Islam. We talked about many issues; for example, I wanted to know about the prayer and what we had to do and to say in prayer. She was a sweet, kind, good-hearted Muslim, who was patient with my questions. Using English letters to represent the Arabic sounds as closely as possible, she taught me some short chapters from the Qur'an that I could recite in prayer.

I was very sure about Islam, but what held me back for a while was my fear of how my friends and family would react. How would they take the news? Would they reject me? How would people treat me? I even remembered the pastor with whom I had grown up. He and his wife, as well as their daughters, had always been kind and friendly to me and included me warmly in church activities. I did not want to see the look in their eyes when I told them I had converted — that look that says, "You poor lost soul. You evidently are confused about something. Let us help you." I did not need anyone's help at that

point. I had questioned and searched, and my quest led me to the conclusion that Islam indeed came from Allah (ﷻ). I was convinced that there is only one God and that I could contact Him directly. I did not want people to pity me or call me ignorant. I knew that they had negative ideas about Islam and Muslims, and that many of these ideas came from erroneous information or from a lack of information. I had to bring forward a lot of courage from deep inside to take the step that would verbalize my choice — that is, my conversion. This was a major decision that would affect every area of my life and my future.

Finally, I decided it was time to declare my Islam. This was the pivotal point in my journey. I could not deny or wait any longer; I really wanted to become a Muslim. My friends had warned me to stay away from those Arabs, but I had not listened. I was drawn to them like a moth is drawn to light. I knew that they had something I needed — they had knowledge of Islam. I had to obtain this treasure; this was my goal.

It was in April of 1989, while Muslims were fasting during the month of Ramadan, that I finally made my decision to embrace Islam. I was amazed at the happiness and ease of those I saw fasting. I could see their conviction to their faith. I had read tons of books that had described the pure and noble character of the Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ). The most attractive feature in Islam was that I discovered that I could directly speak to Allah (ﷻ) without going through anyone. All I had to do was to pray or to supplicate, and instantly I was connected to my Lord. Most of all, I was convinced that there was indeed One God, without the concept of a trinity, and that Jesus (ﷺ) was a Prophet of Allah (ﷻ). In fact, Islam highly respects Jesus (ﷺ) and his mother Mary.

I was still afraid of my parents, but not of anyone else. I was doing this for myself and for my own soul, and I did not care what other people said.

I went to the home of my new friend Melva, and I told her that I wanted to become a Muslim. She asked me why, and I told her, “Because Islam is the truth.”

She asked, “Are you sure?”, and I replied, “Very sure.” She told me to say the *shahâdah* (the Islamic testimony of faith), and I repeated its Arabic phrases: *Ash-hadu an lâ ilâha illâ Allâh, wa ash-hadu anna Muhammâdun rasool Ullâh* (I bear witness that there is no god except Allah, and that Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah). I felt as if a chain had been lifted from my heart, just by uttering and understanding these words. I felt like a caged bird that was allowed to fly freely. My mind was open; I could see the truth as if viewing the whole world at one time. It was a new, strange freedom that made me feel as if I were soaring through the universe. I was confident because I had embraced the truth. I felt like I had indeed discovered a powerful secret — this strong conviction, this faith. Allah (ﷻ) was guiding me, and I felt close to Him. It was a beautiful feeling. Finally, I had broken free from the cocoon in which I had been wrapped all of my life. I was just starting to spread my fragile wings.

I converted on the twenty-seventh day of Ramadan, which is considered to be one of the most important nights of this month of fasting. I fasted the last three days of Ramadan, but I did not even feel hungry. I felt excited and exhilarated, with a new bounce of optimism in my soul. My Muslim friends immediately treated me as their sister and were genuinely kind and generous with me. They had been good to me before, but their feelings and actions increased once I became their sister in Islam. We had a bond, even stronger than that of blood. It was a bond of faith that connected us to each other for the sake of Allah (ﷻ).

My friends and family noticed a change. I stopped going to church; I told Mom I was busy with exams and papers. For almost a year, I hid from my parents the fact that I was a Muslim. This was difficult, but I was not yet ready to face my family. My friends did

not tell my parents out of fear of causing them distress. Some friends distanced themselves from me, while others remained friendly.

After my family did find out, some family members no longer wrote me letters, and some even stopped speaking to my mother for a long time because they blamed her for my becoming a Muslim. I was labeled the ‘black sheep’ of the family. This view has changed somewhat now that they have seen the positive effects that Islam has had on my behavior and character. Over time, most of my relatives — especially my closest family members — have come to accept my conversion.

Back to the beginning days of my conversion... My friends realized that something had changed when I stopped eating with them during the daytime, but I told them that I was busy or just not hungry. In the evenings, I went with my Muslim friends to break my fast. It was a wonderful feeling. There is a sense of accomplishment, a feeling of gaining the pleasure of Allah (ﷻ) by obeying His commands, and the hope of His reward. Also, it is nice to perform one’s fast with a community of Muslims; it is a shared worship, and there is a strong feeling of support for one another. Of course, there are forms of fasting in other religions. Some, like Buddhism, recommend fasting in order to bring about a spiritual awakening. In a sense, this actually does work.¹⁸

On the last day of my fasting, my roommate Candice came to me and said, “You’ve become a Muslim, haven’t you?” I hesitated, so she continued, “You haven’t been eating with us, so you must have.” Then I let the truth flow out. “Yes, I’ve become a Muslim,” I said. She had a look of horror on her face, as if I had some kind of contagious disease. She turned angrily and went to our room. I followed her because I did not want to let the situation remain like this. Candice sat sulkily on her bed. When I tried to talk to her, she turned her face away. I could not believe that my friend, whom I had trusted and shared so many fond memories with, had decided to just throw me

away. It was as if I was being ostracized. I could not believe that just because I had changed my religion, she would be willing to discard our friendship so easily. It burned like acid on my heart.

I refused to give up, so I began speaking. “Why are you angry? Just because I now have a different religion doesn’t mean we still can’t be friends. Do you want to throw away our friendship so easily? I did this for me, and I’m happy. You have your religion, and I have mine. This should not end our friendship.”

Something I said somehow changed her mind. Candice finally spoke to me and said she was sorry. She kept trying to convince me to come back to Christianity, but I told her I was pleased with Islam. She left it at that, and we have remained friends. At times, she even discusses Islam with me. She wants to know exactly what Muslims believe. We debate, but we carry no hard feelings. Even now, I have a couple of other Christian friends with whom I discuss Islam over the Internet. They give me their Christian view, and I give them my Islamic view. We do this respectfully, with no hard feelings. This is the way a Christian-Muslim dialogue should be. We should debate and speak with wisdom and manners and not fight like small, bratty children. Allah (ﷻ) says in the Qur'an:

﴿There shall be no compulsion in [acceptance of] the religion...﴾
(*Qur'an* 2: 256)

﴿For you is your religion, and for me is my religion.﴾ (*Qur'an* 109: 6)

﴿Invite to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good instruction, and argue with them in a way that is best...﴾
(*Qur'an* 16: 125)

One can inform others, discuss and debate. Then the choice is up to the individual to either accept or to reject Islam.

The early days after my conversion were a little difficult as I faced shocked friends, acquaintances and professors. Some of my professors expressed concern for me, but one actually asked me for a book about Islam so that he could better understand the religion. I

guess it was a little unnerving for a Baptist college to have a Muslim convert on campus; that certainly was not what they were aiming for.

The following year, when I received my diploma, I dressed in full Islamic dress, wearing a black scarf on my head and a long, red dress over which I added the cap and gown. I proudly went up to take my diploma, with my mother and grandmother watching me. My father did not attend my graduation; he was still upset over my conversion and had refused to come and see me dressed this way in public. This was in contrast to my high school graduation, when he had dragged himself to see his daughter graduate despite having suffered a stroke the day before. This made me realize that he was pretty angry with me and my decision. He was still respectful to me, but he was trying to punish me. It did not work. I became even stronger, though it saddened me a great deal and did hurt. Everyone else in the audience seemed to be in shock, staring at me with mouths hanging open. It did not bother me. On the contrary, it almost made me laugh, because I felt confident and proud. I had attained my degree, and my mother was proud of me; this was what mattered. Most of all, I was proud of myself. These people's narrow views did not matter to me. Some were supportive, and I did have some nice friends looking on. This was the 'icing on the cake'.

In the beginning, I did not wear the hijab because I had not even told my parents I was a Muslim. I just dressed modestly and stopped wearing make-up. The long skirts and loose clothing were a complete change from the tight jeans, short dresses and mini-skirts that I used to wear. I stopped wearing my spiked-heeled shoes, and I threw out my bottles of black and blue nail polish. I had completely changed my life and wanted to become a pious Muslim to serve Allah (ﷻ). Later, of course, I found out that I could still wear make-up, pants, or short dresses in front of a husband and other women and children. Even so, a degree of modesty should be observed even in front of family and friends.

After almost a year, I wrote an article for the local newspaper to explain what Ramadan was, and the article stated that I was a convert to Islam. At that point, I had to tell my parents the truth before they read it in the newspaper. I was terrified at the thought, but I knew I had to do it so that they would not have an even bigger shock if they read the article.

I decided to telephone my mother. When I told her, “I am a Muslim”, she hung up the phone. That hurt worse than a rock striking my head. I called again, and she slammed the phone down again. I persisted; I called again, and I cried out, “Stay on the line, please!” My mother stayed on the line this time. I could hear her sobbing, and of course it made me feel guilty to have caused her so much pain. I never wanted to hurt my parents, but I had to do this for myself. Allah (ﷻ) must come before anyone else, even parents, because Allah (ﷻ) is the Creator, the Master, and the Sustainer of the universe. So first, I must please Allah (ﷻ). In Islam, after obeying and pleasing Allah (ﷻ), you must obey your parents and respect them, whether they are Muslims or non-Muslims, unless they encourage you to sin. In that case, you must not listen to their wishes of deviation because obedience to Allah (ﷻ) comes before obedience to anyone else.

My sobbing mother asked, “Where did I go wrong? What did I do wrong?” I told her, “You were right.” Then I said, “I did this for myself, and it makes me happy. You have your religion, and I have mine. You are still my mother, and I love you.” She calmed down, and I told her that I would see her the following week. Of course, she relayed the message to my father, and she said that he was boiling mad, hurt and distressed.

When I visited them, though, he was calm and did not say anything about the matter. He acted as if things were the same as usual, although I could tell that he was somewhat upset. My mother started arguing with me and said that I was ‘stupid for not eating

pork'. She thought that Islam was like Hinduism, and that we worshipped idols. I told her, "No, of course not! We have the same God as you, whose name is Allah. He created you and me and the whole universe around us. We share the same prophets, and the last prophet is Muhammad (ﷺ)."

In time, my mother saw that Islam was as I had told her, and she believed that we had some things in common. After about two years, she stopped fighting me.

Another critical point in the beginning was when I put on the Islamic dress, covering all of my body except my face and my hands. I thought it would be easier to tell her over the phone, so I called her and told her. She hung up on me, so I called back, but she hung up again. I called again and convinced her to stay on the line. She began to cry again. She told me, "It's bad enough you took that religion, but now you want to put a towel on your head? What will the neighbors think?" I told her, "I don't care what the neighbors think. I did this for me."

She told my father, who was prepared to see me. I went, wearing a long, light brown dress and a crème-colored scarf. My father laughed at me; he even took a picture of me because he wanted to 'remember the moment'. My mother told me I was dressing like ancient times. (Yet nuns dressed like I did, and no one said a word to them. I wondered why.) I told Mom that she should be happy because I had stopped wearing mini-skirts, which she had hated. She replied, "Can't you find something in between?" I showed her this verse in the New Testament of the Bible that discusses a woman's covering her head to pray: "And every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head — it is just as though her head were shaved." [1 Corinthians 11:5]

The religious laws of Orthodox Jews also require women to cover their hair. Some groups permit women to wear wigs, with or without a scarf or hat, while others do not consider a wig to be sufficiently modest.

Orthodox Christians also cover their heads and bodies modestly in order to enter the church and to pray, and one Christian woman told me that they are actually supposed to do so all the time. I was amazed by her words, so I asked her, "Then why aren't the people doing so?" She had no answer for me except for a nervous grin. She did not cover herself either.

When I used to have to pray in my parents' home due to the time of the prayer, my father would sit and laugh at me. It hurt and angered me at the same time. I calmed myself, ignored him and finished my prayers. I tried to keep calm by reminding myself that he did not understand my religion and did not know what he was doing.

In the beginning, I tried to avoid the subject of religion in order to avoid arguments with my parents. Sometimes they pushed very hard, though, so I had to speak up, while still trying to remain respectful.

One day, Mom fought with me and I refused to argue back. Finally, I asked her politely, "Why don't you read the Qur'an so you'll know what I believe? I know both religions (Christianity and Islam) by firsthand experience. So if you read the Qur'an, then we can sit down together and debate the issue." Her face turned pale, and she obstinately declared, "I know all I need to know of the Qur'an." I inquired, "How can you know if you've never read it?" Then I asked, "Is your faith so weak you can't even read a book?" She turned her back on me and did not speak for a while. She was angry, but I could tell she was thinking.

Sometimes I really felt that she had some questions about her own religion but was afraid to explore them. I happened to be the one who reminded her of those questions, and I think it frightened her at times because she did not want to think about them. This may have been the problem I had with many friends and relatives who did not want to think about the matter due to their own doubts. They could not sit and debate, so they wanted to ignore the topic, change the subject or cast me aside.

In the past, the Church instructed Christians not to look into other religions or read their books, because they could be led astray and end up in hellfire. However, one who has strong faith in his religion can read, debate and study other religions while still being strong in faith. I find that the more I read of other religions, the more my faith in Islam is strengthened, because I see the superior beauty of Islam.

Islam encourages us to question, read, seek knowledge, contemplate and think. Islam has a different history from that of Christianity. Centuries ago, the Islamic state had the pioneers in science and medicine, whose studies actually led Europe into the Renaissance. While the Islamic State was in its 'Golden Age', Europe was in the 'Dark Ages'. Education was prized amongst the Muslims. People were sent out to learn foreign languages and to invite others to Islam. Libraries were built, and the Muslims even preserved ancient Greek and Roman texts. One of the earliest universities was in Cairo, Egypt. Scholars from Christian parts of Europe came to Cairo, Baghdad and Cordoba to study, and they took back the knowledge they acquired. Hundreds of years ago in the Islamic Empire, people could debate religious issues and ask questions. Christians, Jews and others were treated better under Muslim rulers than they were in Christian areas of Europe (contrary to what some Western sources have stated). Islam opens itself to science and to reasoning minds. Islam encourages education, learning, thinking and even asking questions.

I did not push the subject with my mother. On her birthdays and other holidays, I always remembered her and brought her gifts, as I did for my father. If I was abroad, I at least called and sent cards.

Doug and Mary Kathryn accepted my new religion without fighting me, though my brother said that he was not happy about it. Their attitude was, "You have your religion, and I have mine."

After two years, my mother had come to accept everything. She was even helpful. She helped me to make a dress and a scarf, and

when she went grocery shopping, she would read the labels to avoid alcohol and pork products. She is an amazing mother; not many in her position would have been so nice.

My father, on the other hand, stayed upset for about ten years, but he treated me well because he loved me. In the end, he told me that he loved me and was anxious to see me, but because I was living abroad I did not manage to make it back to see him before he passed away. He never even met my husband and never saw his grandchildren, because I had married my husband while I was living in Jordan.

My parents had talked to my husband on the phone. I told them so many good things about him that they were convinced that I was happy, so in the end they accepted my marriage, my religion and my way of life. My parents saw that Islam had changed me for the better. It certainly has not been an easy road, but all of the obstacles and experiences I have had during my lifetime so far have made me a stronger Muslim.

Besides the problems I had in the beginning with my family, there were the usual ignorant remarks and harassment from total strangers. My Islamic dress alerted them to my beliefs. I was patient and ignored their remarks, though at times I wanted to yell back, "How ignorant you are!" People used to say in the summer, "Are you cold?" and then snicker. However, this was my *jihad*, my struggle for the sake of Allah. Jihad can be done in many peaceful ways, such as writing, speaking out, demonstrating, or wearing hijab. Fighting in defense is a last resort. The greatest jihad is with the self, striving to change one's bad habits.

During the first Gulf War, when I was living in North Carolina and also when I visited relatives in Ohio, some people really showed their intolerance, ignorance, racism and bigotry. They used to tell me, "Go back home!", and I would reply, "Home? To Virginia?" They looked at me with surprise. They just assumed because of my dress that I was a foreigner, but in reality, America was my home. How can

some people behave so badly? They really need to be educated and informed about Islam and Muslims.

Muslims are a large group worldwide. According to a report produced by the Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life: "A comprehensive demographic study of more than 200 countries finds that there are 1.57 billion Muslims of all ages living in the world today, representing 23% of an estimated 2009 world population of 6.8 billion."¹⁹ It is difficult to give an exact figure for the number of Muslims in the United States, but some reports estimate between six and ten million. The Pew report estimates 2.5 million, and an NBC News report from Spring 2008 states that "twenty thousand Americans convert to Islam each year."²⁰

Since Muslims are such a large number, people in the West must learn to deal with them fairly. They must try to learn about the real Islam and true Muslims rather than accepting the warped images and stereotypes they see in the media. If Christians and Jews were to look at the essence of Islam, they would see that they have a lot in common with Muslims, and this is because our religions come from the same source. There should be mutual respect and tolerance. We are all human beings and must cooperate in this world for a better life for all of us.

I had one co-worker who was upset that her brother had to go to the Arabian Gulf because of the war. She blamed me as if it was my fault; she had a silly idea that I could control Saddam Hussein, as if I could just call him up and tell him to stop. Being a Muslim does not make me responsible for the actions of all other Muslims, nor does it mean that I agree with them. Besides, her brother joined the military fully knowing the risks that he might have to face. He should have understood that it was his job to face danger. How can others be blamed for his career choice? I felt that her behavior was childish.

At the time of September 11, I was not in the United States. I visited Virginia and Florida a couple of years later, and the people

were not much different in their behavior towards me than they had been before. I guess the situation had cooled down by then. The incident was certainly tragic, and I am sorry for the victims. A Muslim does not like the loss of innocent lives, regardless of what nationality or religion they are. Muslims are supposed to care about all of their fellow human beings. Still, there are a lot of unanswered questions about what occurred, and only Allah (ﷻ) knows the truth. In any case, I do hope that people will keep open minds and not hold such incidents against all Muslims, for Islam is a religion of peace.

Earlier, while I was still living in the United States, people used to always ask me, “Oh, what country are you from? You speak English so well!” They couldn’t tell I had a Southern Virginian accent? I suppose it was the dress; many assume that the Islamic dress is worn for cultural rather than religious reasons. They need to be informed that it is a religious duty that applies to any Muslim woman, wherever she lives in the world.

In North Carolina, I worked in a department store, and a group of Christians once came by trying to convert me to Christianity. I shocked them when I told them that I had formerly been a Christian and had converted to Islam. They left quickly without saying much else.

A couple of times I faced job discrimination. In one case, I saw an advertisement in the newspaper for a job opening, but when I went to apply, I was told that they were not hiring at that time of the year. It was obvious discrimination, but I let it go. Another company gave me a job, but they put me in the back, rather than in the front, so that customers could not see me when they first walked in. It is ridiculous how some places treat Muslim women employees or job applicants. If a person has the right skills, abilities, education and ambition, then why should their modest way of dressing matter, especially when it is for religious reasons?

Recall the first amendment to the United States Constitution, which guarantees freedom of religion. The Islamic covering for the woman, as well as the five daily prayers and the Friday congregational prayer, are acts of worship that fall under 'freedom of religion'. The workplace should try to accommodate the practicing Muslim. If Jews can have off on their sabbath and Christians can go freely to church on Sundays, then why can't Muslims be allowed to observe their religion properly, as the first amendment states? At least they should be allowed to take their lunch break at the time of the congregational prayer on Friday. Many other countries in the world allow for these observances. Sudan, for instance, has some schools that take off on Fridays and Sundays, out of respect for both Muslims and Christians. Christmas was considered a holiday there, although the majority of people in the country are Muslims. In some other Arab countries, people also tend to take off on Christmas Day out of respect for their Christian populations. I wish that non-Muslims would show the same kind of respect to Muslims.

If the place of employment has a dress code or a uniform, then they should allow some flexibility by allowing women to wear a loose uniform with a head cover, which can be tucked in, or by allowing her to make a suitable dress that she and the employer agree upon. When I was working as a nursing assistant in training, I dressed in white, but I wore a Pakistani style dress: white pants, with a long shirt below the knee, a scarf that I tucked in, and white shoes. I kept it cleaned and ironed, and it was within the code. They had no problem with it, and I was happy. Why can't other employers be this flexible?

GOING ON WITH LIFE

*J*went on to get my Master of Arts degree in English Literature from Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (known as Virginia Tech). They had a large number of international students there as well as Muslim and Arab professors. They also had a significant number of professors from various parts of the world like China and Britain, creating a multicultural environment. It is a very large campus with gothic-styled stone buildings and luscious green grass and trees; it is especially beautiful there in the fall. The campus was clean and well-kept. I remember tons of people bustling around.

I enjoyed the quietness of the library and its large variety of books. I love books; I think I would actually enjoy living in a library. I had a nice time while I was there. The undergraduate classes were packed full, but the best part was that the graduate classes had fewer students and more discussions. I completed my degree quickly, in one year and eight months.

Another feature of a large state university is that it is, to some degree, a free atmosphere where people can openly exchange ideas. I was not harassed on campus as I was off campus. People were polite to me. Some did think that I was a foreign student, but even if I was different, I was just another student like them. I believe the difference actually made people curious. Because they were young and from a new generation, they were more accepting of differences than members of the older generation. Decades earlier, I probably would not have found such openness and acceptance in this university.

I met some foreign students, and we ate breakfast and lunch together in the graduate dormitory, where we talked about various

subjects. These German, Swedish and Australian students were surprised to see a Muslim woman studying in a university. They had somehow gotten the wrong idea that Muslim women were not allowed to study. It is sadly true that in one or two countries, due to cultural habits and ignorance, Muslim girls have been prohibited from studying in schools, but this is wrong. Islam encourages both girls and boys to seek knowledge and to learn. When I told these students that I was studying for my Master's degree, and that there were several other Muslim women in our university who were working towards Master's and Doctoral degrees, they were astonished. I told them that Allah (ﷻ) commands us — both males and females — to learn and to seek knowledge.

The first word of the Qur'an that was revealed is *iqra'* (read or recite).²¹ Throughout the Qur'an, Allah (ﷻ) frequently mentions knowledge and learning, and His words instruct us to think, reflect and understand. Knowledge is very important in Islam, and the Qur'an tells the story of Prophet Moses (ﷺ) being sent to the wise man Khidr to gain special knowledge.²² Unfortunately, there are still large numbers of Muslims who are illiterate, particularly in the third world, thus many do not know the essence of their religion. This lack of correct education is one reason that they fall into ignorant practices, and this is something that must be resolved in order to benefit everyone in the world.

The Prophet (ﷺ) said, as related by his companion Abu Hurayrah (رض): «If anyone follows a path seeking knowledge, Allah will ease their way to paradise.» (Muslim)

The Prophet (ﷺ) also said: «Certainly, the learned are the inheritors of the prophets, for indeed the prophets did not leave behind dinars or dirhams, but (they left their) knowledge. Whoever accepts it will receive abundant wealth.» (a sound hadith recorded by Abu Dâwood).

So one who studies and gains knowledge for the sake of his or her faith is performing a kind of worship.

I was able to change the perceptions that these students had of Muslims and Islam, and this made me happy. There are so many wrong ideas and stereotypes, and we must try our best to correct them. We must inform people of the reality of Islam and Muslims. I know women from many Muslim countries who are doctors, engineers, teachers, managers, dentists and computer programmers. The Western world pictures the Arab and Muslim women as uneducated, illiterate, oppressed and imprisoned in their homes while acting as baby factories. This is far from the truth; Arab and Muslim countries have many highly educated women who participate in the work force. Some Muslim countries even have a women's corps in the army; they wear uniforms with scarves on their heads and carry guns. Of course, it is optional for the women to join rather than compulsory.

People at the university were curious about my Islamic dress and my religion, and many of them asked me questions about Islam. They were open-minded and willing to listen. One day a young man asked me, "Why do Muslim women wear Islamic covering?" So I told him, "First, Muslim women cover because Allah has commanded us to. We obey Allah. Another reason is that it helps us to be modest and to protect us from the eyes of men, as well as to avoid temptation. When we go out in the world, men are forced to see our minds rather than our bodies. Also, we do not become slaves to the fashion industry; we respect ourselves as human beings and do not want to be some toy for men. We are more confident when wearing Islamic dress and are able to fully concentrate on our work. Our bodies are only to be seen by our husbands. We can take off the cover, while still dressing modestly, in front of other women and certain close blood-relatives like brothers, fathers, our children, nephews, and, of course, small children under the age of puberty. Our cover lets us be recognized as

decent, pure, pious Muslim women so that we should be left alone and not harassed. Islam tells men to be modest as well.” He was amazed and commented, “It’s a great idea!” This surprised me. In fact, I have actually found men more receptive to the idea of the Islamic dress than women. At times, I felt that some women were intimidated by me.

Once I had a British professor who came in on the first day of class wearing a mini-skirt. She looked me up and down with disapproval. I enjoyed the materials and the class, and there were some interesting discussions. She was a competent teacher, but I could feel that she did not like me. She always wore tight jeans and mini-skirts to class and looked towards me with contempt. She used to invite some of the students out for coffee, but she skipped over me several times, and I was never invited. When I made an appointment to see her to discuss a question I had about a paper, she kept the student before me later than scheduled, and then she rushed me out of her office before I had finished speaking with her, to make sure that the next student was not kept waiting. Why did she prolong her meeting with the student before me? I heard part of their conversation; they were laughing and joking, and it did not even pertain to English. I was furious, because I felt sure that she had done it on purpose. I could not figure out why she hated me, but apparently she did. Was it because I was a Muslim? Or was it just because of my Islamic dress?

In the end, she gave me a grade of C, while I thought I had actually deserved a B. I got As and Bs in all of my other classes, so I was disappointed. I was in no mood to fight over it, though, so I let it go. At least my other grades pulled my average up to a B.

These kinds of stories are not unusual. Over the years, I have seen other Muslim women face problems at their universities. It all depends upon the individual professors. Some bring their personal feelings and views into the job and act upon their prejudices, rather than behaving in a professional manner. In another university near

mine, I saw a couple of friends experience clear discrimination. One was a Turkish woman, who also wearing Islamic dress. She was very intelligent, with a high grade point average, and was studying for a PhD in Math. She had studied several months for an exam that she needed to take, but she failed it. She went to the doctor who was her supervisor, and she asked to see her exam in order to know what her mistakes were. He told her that it was not permitted, and that she would have to retake the exam. She studied hard again and retook it, but she failed again. She was devastated and became depressed. She went to the professor and again requested to know what her mistakes were. He told her bluntly that if she had had another professor, she would have passed. I thought she should report him to the administration, but she felt that it was a losing battle. She transferred to another university where she found a better atmosphere in her department.

I had a Kuwaiti friend in the same Math Department under the care of the same supervisor, and she also failed her exam. After the first try, she switched from Math to Engineering because the head of the Engineering Department was an Arab, so she expected to be treated more fairly.

In my university, I found that most of the professors and members of the administrative staff were fair. My impression is that Virginia Tech is more open to accepting foreign students than some other universities. I enjoyed my time at the university and all of my classes. All of my professors were fair to me except for the one I discussed previously, and I saw that as an isolated case. Things like this happen in life, although it is not fair. Still, my friends and I asked "Why?" and "What did we do?" We were innocent students working very hard for our degrees. At least I fared well and graduated with a good average.

I have fond memories of some professors. I enjoyed tremendously the style and subject matter of my class on George Bernard Shaw,

and I remember a very interesting class on Shakespeare. I fondly remember a pleasant Christian teacher who taught me about Milton and George Herbert. I loved my class on Irish Literature; the professor gave us a lot of encouragement. Once I had a professor ask me to discuss Islam in the class, since it related to Lord Byron's poems about the Greeks and the Turks, and I was able to straighten out misconceptions about Muslims that were found in the poems. I spent roughly half an hour explaining and taking questions, and the students all enjoyed it. They even asked questions about Islam that were not related to the poem. They were very curious, and so was the professor, who was a fair and open-minded man. I enjoyed the classes I took with him.

One professor I particularly enjoyed was a very bright and very kind woman who was originally from Ukraine. She taught my Dramatic Literature class and guided me to the subject of my research paper: *Culture and Politics of Palestinian Literature*. It was very interesting research, for which I used seventy or more books while gathering information on the historical and the philosophical aspects of the subject.

I was also introduced to many fascinating ideas. I remember one talented professor who taught an unusual type of class on philosophy in relation to literature. We read Foucault, Derrida, Nietzsche and others. That was my introduction to this field, and it really opened up a new way of thinking for me. Knowledge and thoughts are tools for the living of life; if one knows how to follow the clues and to open the doors, they can lead him or her to discover how to live life. The greatest tool, though, is through religion and faith. Faith in itself is a type of power; if one's faith is strong enough, it is almost as if he or she is invincible. Islam has given me confidence, strength, an open mind and so much more.

During my stay at Virginia Tech, I had some good Muslim friends. I spent Friday evenings attending lessons at the local mosque with the

women's group, which included Muslim women from all over the world. The lessons were given in Arabic and translated into English. On the Islamic holiday of *Eid*, the Muslims gathered together to pray and then visited friends, because most of them were away from their families. On the first day of *Eid*, my Turkish friend and I spent the day with a Pakistani friend — a very talented Islamic artist — and her American Muslim husband. They were a very sweet couple. We had lunch together and watched an Islamic program on video. It was one of the nicest *Eids* I have ever had.

After my first semester, I moved into an apartment with my Muslim friends. I had three roommates: one Turkish and two Indonesians. We got along well, like we were sisters. During the week, we were always busy at the university, but on the weekends we took turns cooking breakfasts that were typical of our native countries. Once I became very ill; I believe I had pneumonia, although the two doctors whom I saw were not quite sure what I had, and they prescribed medicine that was ineffective. I was sick for ten weeks, but I still attended classes — although I looked like one of 'the walking dead'. My professors knew my condition and were all considerate enough to allow me to turn in my term papers two weeks late.

My roommates watched over me with care. My Indonesian friends made me drink ginger tea, which burned but did open up my lungs, making it easier for me to breathe. A Palestinian friend brought me a mixture of herbs, which I think also helped some. She had mixed together hibiscus, chamomile, sage and thyme to create an interesting tea. I really appreciated all of their attention, and I was finally able to get well, thanks to Allah (ﷻ).

Late at night, I used to drive my roommates crazy with the 'click-click' of my manual typewriter. (Unfortunately, at that time I had no computer.) I would do my research, and after finishing those papers, I would begin typing my essays and reports. As an English Literature major, I had a lot of writing to do, but my friends were patient, praise

be to Allah (ﷻ). We were a happy group of young women, and I will always treasure those memories.

I used to pray and read the Qur'an in the middle of the night or in the early part of the morning, while the others were asleep. Sometimes I knew that the others were up too, performing extra prayers, because I could see the light from under their bedroom doors and hear them reciting the Qur'an. The world is so different at night; it is so quiet and calm, like another world. Nights and early mornings before sunrise were times when I was physically tired but mentally awake. I enjoyed reading for class during these times, and things seemed much clearer then. I used to sit until dawn sometimes just to catch up on my work; I fondly remember how I sat curled up on the couch, completely engrossed in whatever Jane Austen novel I was reading. My friends would get up to pray the dawn prayer and find me still reading.

In this period of my life, I was also reading every good Islamic book I could put my hands on. I was thirsty for knowledge and hungry for truth. I wanted to know my religion inside and out. This desire still burns inside me. Sometimes I want to study and to do everything, to be in every field. I have too many ambitious dreams, and I wish I still had the level of energy now that I did then. I am sure we all wish for the energy of a teenager or young adult.

I also love to read and to learn about many things other than religion. I like increasing my general knowledge and learning new things. Educational issues are a hobby for me. If I can ever find time, I want to learn a couple more languages. I enjoy reading about health issues and increasing my information on new technologies and discoveries. I like watching news interviews. It is as if I am collecting information from all quarters, digging through the rubble and saving what is useful and beneficial while leaving the rest.

A few years back, I started a notebook in which I put interesting, wise and useful quotations that I read or heard. Sometimes these quotes are useful in my writings. I also intend to keep them for my

children, so they can hear some wise advice or grasp a particular lesson. I find that many of these quotes make me stop to ponder. Two of my favorites are, “Knowledge is a treasure,” and “Knowledge is power”; I definitely agree with those concepts.

I still keep in touch with a very kind and intelligent German friend from my university days, and I wonder about all the other classmates and friends I had. Most of them moved to other states or countries. It is normal for people to become busy with life and lose contact with each other. Maybe one day, I will see some of these people again, because the world really is a small place. I remember meeting a woman in the United States and then becoming friends with her when I met her in Jordan three years later. Then we discovered that I had gone to elementary school with her cousin, and that we had lived in the same city at one time, although we had never met. We had to travel around the world to become friends. Life can indeed be very strange.

When the time came for my Master’s exam, I was nervous, although I had spent months studying and preparing for it. I had no indication about its style or design. It was the strangest exam I had ever taken, and it certainly was not easy. The exam only had two questions, one general and one specific. For each question, I was given two hours to write the answer and half an hour for proofreading. In between the two questions, we had a half hour break. We were given several questions to choose from; they were based on the materials we had been told to read. It was an exhausting and challenging exam. I did well on one question, but not on the other, so I failed the exam.

That was the first time in my whole life that I had ever failed an exam or even done poorly in anything. I had always been a good student, so this was a shock to me. I was devastated, but then I changed my point of view and decided to take something positive from the experience. It is important to know how it feels to fail, to accept it and to learn from mistakes. The head of the department was

kind enough to sit with those of us who had failed, to give us advice on where we had gone wrong and on how to approach the exam the next time we took it. I was given a chance to retake the exam the following month. Again I read, studied and prepared myself (and prayed a lot). Of course, this exam had different questions from the previous one. I passed the exam and was very happy and very thankful.

I started job hunting and making my resumé. I knew that I would miss my university days and my friends, but I hoped to get a good job and start a new life.

Between my Bachelor's and Master's degrees, I had spent two years working in various positions, most of which I did not enjoy. I tried training as a nursing assistant, I did telemarketing, and I worked as a department manager in a store, which was one of the better situations. The best job was as a secretary, because I liked my boss and his wife, who were very generous and kind with me. It was a comfortable atmosphere with friendly co-workers. I was restless and moved to North Carolina, where I tried other jobs, but they were not what I was looking for either. I thought I wanted something in my field, but I even had doubts about that. I considered changing my career and going back for a degree in science or medicine. I wanted money, a good job and some direction and purpose. I felt frustrated with my work conditions.

I was confused, so I prayed to Allah (ﷻ) to guide me, performing a special prayer that Muslims say for guidance. Then I had a dream that showed me the answer.²³ I understood that it would be best for me to stay in my chosen field and get my Master's degree in English, and to continue writing. Praise be to Allah (ﷻ), this has been the best thing for me. It has been beneficial in my work and my life. Having my MA degree opened up doors to jobs that I would not have gotten otherwise. I am happy now with my decision. At the moment I took the final decision to continue my education, I was relieved to have some direction and assurance.

After I had completed my Master's degree, I again moved back to North Carolina. A friend told me that an Islamic school was looking for an elementary teacher. I needed a job, so I said, "Why not? At least for a while." I really believed that I would be doing something with a purpose: shaping young Muslim minds. I liked the school when I saw it, although it was very small and in the beginning stages. I met the other teachers, was interviewed and accepted a position. I was excited about the prospect of being one of the pioneers of this new school, which was beginning its second year. I was a little nervous though, since it was to be my first real teaching job.

I fondly remember my enthusiasm, which was typical of many beginning teachers. Unfortunately, they sometimes get 'burned out' later, after years of unappreciated teaching and many obstacles. I thought that I could change the world and plant the seeds for a better future. I prepared the room, decorations, papers and lesson plans, but at the end of every day, I used to collapse on my bed and sleep like a rock.

Teaching, in general, is a very demanding job, especially if one tries to be a very good teacher. The work always goes home with a teacher. She eats, sleeps and breathes lesson plans and essays — as I found out again years later when I was teaching high school students.

Although teaching the children was exhausting, it was also a wonderful and rewarding experience. Of course, there were days when I was worried and frustrated, and there were days when I was not sure if I was getting through to the students. I wanted the best for them, and I even used to think about their problems, both scholastic and personal, while I was at home trying to sleep. Constantly, I would worry about one of them as if he or she were my own child, and this was very stressful. I really loved these first and second graders. I used to stay after school to tutor one boy who had recently moved to the United States. He did not understand any English, but he was very intelligent, and within a month he actually had a basic

understanding of English on which we could build.

I taught these children all of the subjects, including religion, in English, and there was a special teacher for Arabic and Qur'an. It was challenging because we had two grades in the same classroom at the same time. I had to be creative and very active to juggle both. Somehow I did it, and they seemed to do well.

I was well respected by the Muslim community because I was a teacher; this is more than I can say for those poor teachers who are treated with disrespect in American public schools.

Besides teaching at the school, I was busy attending some educational seminars that were given by an experienced Muslim schoolteacher who had taught in public schools. The information helped a lot then, and it even helps me now when I am teaching my own children.

I lived a few blocks away from the mosque, so I would sometimes walk to work, although the other teachers used to come by and pick me up for work most of the time. After a year, I got my own car. I used to spend a lot of time in the mosque praying and listening to lectures each week. Even on Fridays, during school time, we would all go to hear the sermon, which was given in Arabic and then translated into English. After the prayer, some children left early with their parents while the rest stayed and enjoyed pizza and an Islamic video (usually a cartoon or film). Then we would spend the rest of the afternoon with arts and crafts or stories. Friday is the Muslim holy day (similar to Sunday for most Christians and Saturday for Jews), but in the U.S., the children have to attend school on Fridays. Therefore, we made it a half day of studies and left the other half for fun activities.

This community gave me love and strength, and they were like my family. I had so many friends, but there are three I remember very fondly. One was an American Muslim who gave me support whenever I was upset or frustrated about my job. She was a very

active person. She kept a children's library of nice Islamic books, which I used to check out from her and use in my class. She is so special, and I really thank her for her support. The other friend was teaching with me but had to resign because she could not find reliable babysitters for her children. She always had wise words and heart-felt advice. She moved back to Egypt, and we kept in touch after that. She is a really extraordinary person; I respect her a lot and miss her greatly. My other friend was a newly converted American Muslim who was also an enthusiastic teacher, even more than I was. I used to watch her teaching kindergarten, and she was fabulous. The children loved her so much, and she knew how to connect with them. She was an excellent teacher who made her classes fun. There were a lot of other friends who supported and helped me along the way; I was blessed to have such good friends.

During this time, I continued my writing of poetry, short stories and plays. I did some charity work, too, trying to help people whenever I could. Once there was a group of poor Muslims who came from Kenya, and I invited one woman to stay with me for a week until she moved to a more permanent home. During this time, I cooked for her, gave her clothes and took her to work with me. I felt so sorry for her. She was married, but she had left her husband in their country in order to obtain her visa for the U.S., where she hoped to find work and be able to send for him and their children later. I often wonder how one can stand to be separated from his or her family. It would be so difficult for me.

I remember very clearly the first night that she spent in my home. Somehow, using the English she knew, the broken bits of Arabic I possessed at that time, and her own dialect, we were able to communicate. By some miracle, we understood each other most of the time.

The next day, she cried because she told me that I had been so kind to her and that even many people in her own country would not have

treated her as I had. This really touched my heart. I gave her a gift so she would remember me.

Once I had a friend who was a doctor in the emergency room. Her husband was an engineer, who was working and studying for a PhD at the same time. They left for work very early in the morning, and they came home late. Sometimes she even had to sleep overnight in the hospital. They had two very cute daughters, the younger of whom was in the care of her grandmother while her parents were at work. No one else in their family would help them with the children, although they needed someone to pick up the oldest one from school as well as to drop her off in the morning. The parents asked me if I could take her in my home and watch over her and take her to school with me. She was not in my class; she was in kindergarten, but I agreed. They offered a salary for the help, but I refused and told them I would rather be rewarded by Allah (ﷻ) for doing a good deed.

In this period of my life, I was learning about giving, cooperating, sacrificing, caring and helping. I enjoyed my time in the Muslim community there and helped with whatever activities I could. Also, this was a time when I increased my Islamic knowledge through sermons, lectures and books.

Dealing with children from the position of a teacher, I began to understand the difficulties of raising children and of parenting. I called my mother and apologized to her for giving her a hard time when I was a child. I had been very active and stubborn, and I sometimes drove her crazy. My mother told me that there was no need to apologize because that was normal behavior for a child.

People really do not understand parenting, or even their own parents' point of view, until they become parents themselves or spend a large amount of time with children, in the role of a teacher, for example. Parenting is undeniably a very difficult job, as I am finding out now that I am a parent, too.

NEW COUNTRY, FRESH START

*A*fter my experience as a teacher in the Islamic school, I decided to go to Jordan because my husband wanted to go there to live near his family. It was a chance I had been waiting for. I had always wanted to go to a Muslim country, where I hoped to learn Arabic and more about Islam. I was very excited to be going on an adventure. I was a little disappointed and surprised when I got there, though, because the image that I had in my mind of a Muslim country (which is probably the same image that many Muslims have until they actually visit an Arab or Muslim country) was not the same as the reality. I must have expected a utopia, but it certainly was not that. What I observed was surprising. I found some women wearing mini-skirts, some people exhibiting wild behavior and some people lacking enthusiasm for religion. I found among the people a mixture of various levels of faith and practices; of course, this is normal for all human beings, and these differences are found everywhere. I even found alcohol being sold and some Muslims drinking. At first, I could not believe it; after some time, the initial shock wore off, and I started to see the reality.

Some new Muslims travel to the Middle East in search of a utopia or a paradise. I am sorry to tell them that a utopia does not exist, and they will not find paradise until the afterlife. It can help to learn what to expect before traveling somewhere. We should not give up hope and optimism, but we have to be realistic. With patience and perseverance, we can work to change things in society for the betterment of Muslims and for all of humanity, but we must realize

that this does not happen overnight. It is a slow process that needs wisdom, patience and hard work. So take the advice of motivational speaker Zig Ziglar, who said, “If you dream it, you can achieve it,”²⁴ but also remind yourself that in order for the dream to become a reality, you must get active and not just sit day-dreaming all the time. Dreams are achieved not by thoughts and wishes, but by hard work.

I believe that the main goals that Muslims should have at this point in time — especially when trying to invite others to Islam — are education (both academic and religious), and inviting others to Islam in a nice, respectful manner, as Allah (ﷻ) says:

﴿Invite to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good instruction, and argue with them in a way that is best...﴾ (Qur'an 16: 125)

Preaching and persuasion do achieve results, though it may take a long time. Hearts are persuaded by hearing good words and by seeing good actions, so make yourself the best possible role model of Islamic behavior. Learn tolerance and patience, and know when it is better to speak or argue respectfully and when it is better to keep quiet. Don't waste your breath arguing with those who are very ignorant and stubborn; just leave them alone and keep your own self-dignity. People on both sides must learn to respect other opinions and to respect others as human beings.

Allah (ﷻ) gave each person a mind, and in the end, the choice is up to every individual; he or she is free to worship as he or she wishes and is free to have an opinion.

﴿There shall be no compulsion in [acceptance of] the religion. The right course has become clear from the wrong...﴾ (Qur'an 2: 256)

Before I went to Jordan, I lived with my parents for a few months. They were heart-broken because I was leaving. It was also a trying time because my parents had to get used to having a Muslim living with them. In the beginning, my father laughed at me, but then he finally stopped. I actually convinced my mother to listen to some

Qur'an recitation on cassette, and she thought it was beautiful. I went everywhere with my mother while I was wearing Islamic dress, so it became normal to her. I think she did notice people staring at me, but she did not mind and felt that it was their own problem. My mother was respectful of my beliefs by this time. She was careful in her cooking, always reading the food labels to make sure there were no alcohol and pork products in the ingredients. My parents ate pork in front of me, but I asked my mother not to cook my food in the same pot that she cooked pork in, or at least to clean it very well with hot, soapy water first. She respected my request. Not everyone would, so I consider it a blessing to have such a good, kind-hearted, understanding mother.

My father loved me, but at that time he did not accept my religion. Sometimes he thought it was unpatriotic, so I tried to explain to him that it had nothing to do with my nationality. I tried to tell him it was my religion and my way of living, and it had to do with my soul. Eventually, I think he realized this, but it took him about ten years to really accept it. He was angry because I was going to Jordan, but he did not stop me. He wrote to me later and told me how much my mother missed me, saying that I had broken her heart. This wounded me a lot. I never meant to hurt either of them, but this was something I had to do for myself and for my quest for truth.

While I stayed with them, some relatives came to visit. They accepted my religion, although some of them seemed a bit uncomfortable. It is strange to me how people who watched me grow up from infancy to adulthood, and who knew my family and me, would then treat me so differently — becoming almost afraid of me or angry with me — just because I changed my religion. My decision had nothing to do with them. Why were they so upset? I think that people fear what they do not know and do not understand; in general, most Americans really do not know Islam well — the real Islam, that is. Knowledge decreases fear, especially correct knowledge. I did,

however, find my mother's best friend to be very kind and helpful. She actually had an open mind and was interested in hearing about Islam.

My mother cooked my favorite Italian foods and desserts. Mom is a great cook; she knows how to cook foods from countries around the world, though our origins are from Ireland, England and Germany. Like most Americans, we are of mixed ancestry. Mom learned how to cook some Arabic dishes from me. She also bought me a very nice outfit, which was long enough and loose enough to be worn as an Islamic dress.

While I was in high school, my mother was my friend. After my conversion, we became distanced from each other somewhat, which was hurtful, but she chose this. With time and patience, we grew close again, because all along she loved me very much.

The day I left for Jordan, my mother cried. I understood that it was difficult for her; it was hard for me, too, but it was something I had to do. I was taking flight on an unstoppable quest. I had to go, and I think she understood that. In the beginning, I usually wrote to them, and I called only occasionally, but later I started calling more often. The Internet made calling easier; it is a wonderful technology that is very beneficial and useful.

I caught a plane in North Carolina and then switched to another in New York. It was a very long, tiring flight that took about thirteen hours, with a stopover in Amsterdam. I was on the same flight with an Arab woman that I knew, so we helped each other. I helped her with her three children, and she helped me in traveling, since this was my first international trip alone.

On my arrival in Jordan, I viewed the patchy ground from the sky and was shocked to see more brown spots on the ground than green ones. "Where is the grass?" I wondered. Later, I found out that Jordan tends to be dry and does not get much rain. It is green, but the airport was near a less-populated, dry area. Over the past few years,

they have been planting more trees, though. Jordan has more useful fruit trees than they do other types of trees, but there are a lot of fir trees being planted, as well as palm trees. It makes an interesting mixture.

The people on the plane and at the airport were very helpful. The flight attendants spoke English, so I had no difficulties in communication. I found the people to be very friendly. Arabs, in general, are very hospitable to their guests; this is a tradition reaching back to even pre-Islamic times.

It was December, and my first week there was cold, rainy and dreary. I found myself feeling depressed as a result of homesickness and the gloomy weather. After a couple of weeks, I began even to miss hearing the English language, although many people spoke to me in English. I understood only a few words of Arabic at that time. I had been reading the Qur'an very slowly in Arabic, but the spoken Arabic dialects are somewhat different from the classical written language found in the Qur'an. I resigned myself to be patient and tried to observe the people and to learn the culture. In time, I got used to life in Jordan and began to like it and feel at home there.

During my first months in Jordan, my feelings were a mixture of sadness — even depression sometimes — and happiness. It was a paradox. I learned more about the culture and learned many interesting things. I began picking up the language. I found very nice people and made new friends. Still, it was strange to be in a different land and to hear a foreign language constantly. At first, I knew no other Americans there; it helped a lot when I met some later. I visited them and took their advice about adjusting to life in Jordan; they really supported me. Sometimes I would listen to the English television channel just to hear the language. I pushed myself to watch Arabic films, and I began to find them interesting, although I did not understand everything. In time, I even began to understand the Egyptian accent. Watching television in a foreign language is a great

way to learn the language, but this should be done daily and for an extended period of time. I found that cartoons for children were the best choice because they are simple.

The pace is slower in Jordan than in the United States. Rather than speeding by in a 'New York minute', life crawled along, and I learned some patience as a result. Jordan is quite modern, though in some aspects there is a lack of organization, as in other parts of the third world. In general, Jordan is very clean and efficient, and most consumer goods are available in one place or another. Electricity runs smoothly without any problems. The biggest problem is the shortage of water, particularly in the summer months. Jordanians have learned to conserve water and to use leftover water in various creative ways. I was amazed at the efficiency and genius of the Arab women I saw.

As for the driving habits, they are a bit aggressive. Just on the ride from the airport, there were about five times when our taxi driver almost had an accident. The people drive fast, close to other cars, and in a tough manner. Jordan has modern streets and decent driving, depending on your perspective.

Living in Jordan prepared me for my stay in Sudan. Had I gone directly to Sudan from the U.S., it would have been a complete shock, and I might have been traumatized. However, after being patient with the small things in Jordan, and learning to live independently there, I found that I could survive in Sudan as well. Sudan had an air of simplicity and a mysterious beauty, but it was a great lesson in patience. Things there are changing and advancing, but it requires time — a lot of time. The Sudanese people are very friendly, simple and mostly kind-hearted; I met many nice Sudanese people while I stayed there. I admire the Muslims there, who immediately rush to pray as soon as they hear the call to prayer.

In Jordan, all of the buildings are made of stone. They are almost all the same color, with only small variations. The buildings are close together, in contrast to the spaciousness of Virginia, where I grew up.

It took me time to be able to distinguish the slight differences between houses and other buildings. Eventually, I began to learn my way around and could go most places alone by taxi.

Jordan has some popular tourist attractions, but I only saw a couple of them. I visited the Roman Amphitheater in the downtown city of Amman, which is the capital of Jordan. The amphitheater is in good condition and very large. I also sat in the amphitheater in Jerash, which is one of the oldest cities in the Middle East and consists of Roman ruins. These old ruins are used often to host big concerts, and the amphitheater seats a large number of people. Jordan has many places like the hot springs in Ma'een and the old Christian churches, as well as other Roman ruins with mosaics in Madaba. Its most famous structures are the Nabatean ruins in Petra, which many have seen in the film *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, and the smaller structures that were filmed in *Mortal Kombat*. The sand is rose-colored, and the houses are carved out of stone. The Nabataeans had an advanced civilization that eventually perished.

I had the opportunity to visit the Dead Sea in Jordan. The water is so salty that most things float easily in it; of course, there is nothing alive in it. I could observe how salty and oily the water was by its glistening in the sun and its potent sea smell. Many tourists go to picnic there and to bathe in the medicinal Dead Sea waters and rub its mud on their skin. Some scholars say that this is the site of the ancient cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, home to the people of Prophet Lot (عليه السلام).

In the south of Jordan is the beach resort area of Aqaba, which I visited for a couple of days. It was relaxing to sit and sip coffee while watching the sun set over the Red Sea. In the distance, I could see a part of Egypt across the sea, and the Saudi border was not far away by car. There are facilities for water skiing and scuba diving there. I rode in a glass-bottomed boat and saw beautiful coral and various fish. It was nice, but the weather was quite hot and humid. There

were seafood restaurants and Arabic style restaurants that offered Arabic desserts.

Jordan still has its Bedouins, though most are settled now. It has a unique culture and hospitality. It is advancing quickly, with many entrepreneurs starting more businesses there. Most Jordanians are literate, and many Jordanians of the newer generations are well-educated.

While I was there, I took a course in spoken Arabic at the French Cultural Center, where I met many other foreigners from Germany, America, France, Italy and Britain. I liked the teacher's style; he used an informal method that applied the language to everyday activities, like going to the bank or to the hospital, or buying items in the supermarket. Thus, the language became more real and useful. Sometimes the teacher would ask us what was on our minds, and this would lead us to have conversations in Arabic. I developed a good basis for the spoken language.

In time, and through watching television, I learned more Arabic. Of course, I was doing my own self-study in the written language, and the fact that I had to manage my own affairs pushed me to learn to cope in the Arabic language. I had to shop at the supermarket, go to the bank, go to work and take taxis. All of these things required at least some knowledge of Arabic, though I found quite a few people who were more than ready to practice their English with me.

I attended some English-language Islamic lessons that were offered for foreign women. We used to share our experiences in Jordan, and I learned helpful tips from some of the women who had lived in Jordan for decades. I got recipes for some basic Arabic dishes, and they explained what to substitute for certain ingredients. I also learned about conserving and recycling water for cleaning and agriculture products.

My Arab friends used to invite me for lunches and dinners. In the U.S., I had already learned from some Arabs how to cook Arabic

food, and my skills were expanded in Jordan. They have a variety of delicious foods, but some of them take a lot of time to prepare, and cooking such foods requires patience. Of course, there were a variety of restaurants and shops that offered the basic Arabic foods like *hummus* (a dip made from chickpeas), *fool* (fava beans), *umtabell* (a dip made from eggplant), *shwarma* (a sandwich wrap with meat or chicken) and desserts like *kanafa* (a pastry made with cheese) and *baklawa* (known to many by its Greek name of baklava). I enjoyed these delicious foods. There were a lot of foreign restaurants as well, with burgers and pizza, and supermarkets everywhere to buy food for cooking.

I have indeed learned to cook most of these time-consuming Arabic dishes, but I still have the practicality of an American who is used to doing things quickly. I only make very difficult things on special occasions, and the rest of the meals are made using my 'quick' methods. Throughout the years, especially after having children, I have learned to cook very quickly and to make several dishes at the same time. I have also learned how to plan ahead. To be successful, I had to learn to be efficient like this so that I would not 'live' in the kitchen.

Jordan is beginning to become as much of a 'rat-race' as America; people are becoming consumed by work, and consumer goods are becoming more readily available. In just about ten years' time, I have seen Jordan change drastically. Now it reminds me of America. In some ways, this may be good; in others, it may be bad.

For example, Jordanians are eating out more often. I observed the same thing while vacationing in Malaysia; many people there are eating out more often than they did in the past.

I had the wonderful opportunity to visit Malaysia a couple of times. Our first visit was when my sons were babies, a few years ago. I found it to be a very beautiful, pleasant place. It was hot and humid but very lusciously green. The capital city, Kuala Lumpur, is very

modern, fast-paced and booming. It has many colorful and beautiful mosques. There are a lot of shops and restaurants, and we enjoyed a delicious meal at a Chinese restaurant in the company of some good friends. Kuala Lumpur has very tall, modern buildings; I got a chance to see the Petronas Towers, the very tall twin towers that are joined with a steel bridge between the two buildings. They were truly amazing. The city is bustling, but the rural areas are more peaceful. I found Malaysia, at least the places I visited there, to be very clean and organized. The people were very nice, kind and helpful. Most knew some English, and some even knew Arabic.

We went to a mountain resort and enjoyed our time there. I also visited some nearby islands that are a part of Malaysia. I went to Penang, which has a strong Chinese influence, and I even visited a Buddhist temple. It was a very beautiful and fascinating island. The hotel had a splendid view of the sea, and there were some interesting shops.

The most relaxing place we went, though, was Langkawi, an archipelago of ninety-nine islands off the coast of Malaysia. It is truly a fantastic vacation spot. It has a wonderful aquarium with fish and other sea species from around the world. The aquarium had an interesting structure; it was designed so that when we walked under it, we could look up and see the fish — including baby sharks — swimming above us. Walking inside the aquarium was like crossing a bridge, with glass windows beside us and over our heads.

Also, there was a crocodile farm — dangerous maybe, but interesting nonetheless. There were boat rides on the sea and very tiny islands where we could see the forests and their animals. We saw monkeys and beautiful birds in their natural habitat. I still remember the trip vividly, and I would love to visit Malaysia again someday.

The Malaysians are very hospitable, and they concentrate on taking care of their guests. I found them to be very efficient and hardworking. Asians in general have a reputation for working very

hard, and they are productive, but often their lives are consumed by work. I suppose it is better to be a workaholic than a lazy bum, but family life is negatively affected by those who work too many long hours and spend more time eating out.

It seems like the whole world is moving in this direction, but there are still a few areas in the developed world that have a relaxed atmosphere. I visited a friend in Italy a couple of years ago and found that the small town of Brescia closes its shops early so that people can rest and spend time socializing with family and friends. Larger cities like Milan, however, stay active until very late into the night.

Italy seems to care for its citizens very well. My friend's husband is a doctor there, and I was amazed at what I saw of Italy's healthcare system. In 1978, the country adopted a tax-funded universal health care system called the National Health Service, which covers emergency care, hospital stays, treatment, tests and most medicines. The World Health Organization rated Italy as having the second best healthcare system in the world (after France).²⁵ After seeing the Italians socializing and taking care of themselves, I was genuinely impressed. The rest of the world should really ponder this. Some people have realized that not everything in life is about money and work.

Speaking of health care reminds me that after I moved to Jordan, my mother was so worried that she asked me, "Do they have hospitals there?" I almost laughed. I replied, "Of course. They have several hospitals. They have hotels, cinemas, shopping malls, banks and restaurants. They even have Pizza Hut." Mom was amazed. Many people, including myself before I knew any Arabs, believed that Arabs lived in tents in the desert and rode camels. In fact, I rarely see camels in Jordan, although I did see one when I visited the pyramids on a trip to Egypt. The Arab world is quite modern.

The worst conditions I experienced were in Africa, and still Africa is a little better off, in certain areas, than most people think. I lived in

Sudan for almost six years, and I spent five years in Ghana, so I can compare these countries. Though there are diseases like malaria, dysentery and yellow fever, as well as the risk of Hepatitis B, they are not as widespread as people in the West might believe. When we see some disaster on television, we think the whole area is in the worst condition. Yes, it happens, and it is distressing, but it is confined to the country, the city, or the area.

Malaria is a terrible disease that requires a lot of research, and inshallah a vaccine will be developed to combat it. Some people do die because they are too poor to get treatment, but others are strong enough to survive on their own. Still, prevention is better than a cure. Sometimes certain diseases like this can simply be avoided by being cleaner around the house or by washing one's hands more often. A simple mesh net can protect people, yet some people cannot afford such things or do not even realize the value of using them. What is lacking in Africa and in parts of Asia is education. If we are to help the world, we must educate and train people to work, to think and to take care of themselves properly. This would really make a huge impact on their lives and improve their situations greatly.

Speaking again of Jordan, I have found that one difficult aspect is Jordan's intensely cold winters. The freezing wind makes the stone houses feel like igloos, or actually like freezers. Some houses have radiators; others only have kerosene heaters. I have tried both methods. The radiators do help, but the most practical thing to do is to wear several layers of clothing. I used to walk around feeling like a big bear because I was wearing two pairs of pants, a skirt, a blouse, a sweater and then a jacket when going outside. Of course, one good thing was the scarf on my head keeping me warm. Summers there are pleasant, but by July, it begins to be too hot for me. In the past couple of years, Jordan has seen some unusually hot summer days. It is beginning to get as hot as Sudan, which is not far from the equator, not to mention Ghana, which is almost on the equator. Ghana has

tropical heat with rainy seasons and some humidity. At least most of Sudan has dry heat. Jordan, being further north, should not be this hot. I wonder if this is a sign of global warming. May Allah (ﷻ) help us.

In Virginia, I was used to cold winters, but I believe Jordan is colder. Maybe this is due to the desert location and the strong, cold winds that stab like a knife. I used to think that the summers in Bluefield were hot, but after experiencing summers in Jordan, Sudan and Ghana, I can say that the temperature was wonderful.

While we lived in Sudan, we used to visit Jordan frequently to see my in-laws. The winters in Sudan are like springtime in Jordan, but some nights in winter become very cold, as is typical of the weather in the desert. Summer in Sudan is dry, dusty and hot like fire. Sometimes there is humidity, but usually only during the rainy season. In the summer, temperatures in Sudan can reach 115°F (46°C) during the mid-day; they cool down some at night.

Sudan is blessed with a yearly rainy season. The summer months are April, May, June and part of July, and rain begins to fall at the end of July or the beginning of August. Until October, there is rain sometimes, with some days dry and some wet. After October, there is usually no rain for the rest of the year.

Jordan, on the other hand, gets rain in the winter and none during the rest of the year. In Bluefield, I used to see rain at any time of the year, so the weather in Jordan seemed strange at first, but now I am getting used to not seeing much rain. Occasionally, I dream of dancing and twirling myself around under a rain shower until my clothes are soaked, and then going inside the house, changing my clothes and sipping hot cocoa. Gone are those days for me, though.

Ghana's weather is the opposite of what I was used to in Jordan and Virginia. When they have snow and cold, Ghana is very hot and dusty, and when they are in the middle of hot summers, Ghana cools down and has rain. This took some getting used to.

Sudan is dusty, but it has trees and some grass. The largest part of the Nile River runs through Sudan, and there are a lot of agricultural areas along the river. The land has a lot of potential. Sometimes work is very slow in Sudan; I think that is due to the very hot weather, hard living conditions, poor educational level, simple life and certain illnesses.

People are trying to develop Sudan; however, the problems it has recently faced are impeding progress. The capital, Khartoum, is quite modern, and the main roads are paved, though some places still have dirt roads. There are restaurants, hotels, universities, cinemas, supermarkets, Internet cafes and a large shopping mall, although the rural areas are still quite simple.

There is the potential for tourism as well. It is not well known, but Sudan has pyramids in the North. I visited the small pyramids but have yet to see the large ones. They are older and somewhat different from those in Egypt. Sudan was the home of an ancient Nile civilization, which developed distinctly from that of Egypt's. They were both great civilizations, and both had hieroglyphic languages, but with some differences, similar to the notion of dialects. There is a very nice museum in Khartoum that has a lot of information on the history of the Nile Civilization. Sudan has much to offer and has its own natural beauty. Early mornings are a wonderful time to go on a picnic beside the Nile River, which has two parts: the Blue Nile and the White Nile.

Ghana is a bit more developed than Sudan. It has more shops and a new large shopping mall with a modern cinema. Most of the roads in the capital of Accra are paved, but when one ventures north to the villages, it becomes apparent that they are in need of a lot of development. Most of the North is inhabited by Muslims, but many Christians live alongside them, and there are others who still practice their tribal religions.

There are around fifty different languages in Ghana, associated with different tribes, with four main languages; many people can speak two or three of their tribal languages. English is the official language, and this helps them in communicating amongst the various communities. Many people know French as well, because some of Ghana's neighbors are French speaking countries.

Ghana is one of the most stable countries in Africa and is really trying hard to develop itself. There are a lot of foreigners in Ghana from various countries. In general, the people are friendly. They have an ancient culture, and it is interesting to see how the people mix and tend to get along.

Many might ask me, why move to Sudan or to Ghana with these difficulties? Yes, both countries are very hot. Yes, sometimes the electricity cuts off in both of these countries, especially in the summer months. Yes, the countries still need further development. However, I would ask why not? It is good to know firsthand how others live. There is stress that come from living in these countries, but a different kind of stress than that experienced in the West. My main reason for going to Sudan and Ghana, though, was that my husband opened businesses in these countries.

While I was in Jordan, I had been working as a teacher at various schools and then at a language center. During the third year that I was in Jordan, I met my husband while I was teaching adults who wanted to improve their English. I found him to be a very nice, intelligent, charming and witty man. I saw that he was a practicing Muslim, which is the main criterion for me. After we had several conversations, he wanted me to meet his family. I went to their home several times for lunch and found them to be a very nice, loving, kind family. After he asked me to marry him, he told his family. They liked me very much and were happy because I was a Muslim, but in the beginning, they had some fears because I came from a different culture. He gently convinced them, and they agreed.

I was very excited, and I called my family to tell them that I was getting married. Mom was concerned, but I had already been writing to her about him and his good character. In the end, she told me that if I was really happy, then she was happy for me. My father was not happy at all, though. He told me to “come back to America and marry an American.” I told him, “I’m a Muslim and I must marry a Muslim.” I also said that he was a good, respectable, kind man. My father hung up the phone.

Muslims are to obey their parents in everything except what is forbidden, but my father had no legitimate objection except that the man was a Muslim and a foreigner. A Muslim woman should marry a Muslim man in order to preserve her freedom to practice her religion. A non-Muslim husband could mislead her, threaten her or infringe on her freedom of religion, because the man is generally the stronger one in the matrimonial unit. Some non-Muslims may agree to let each spouse have his or her own religion and own ways, although they often change their minds later on. If each spouse has a different religion, the children may be confused later as to which religion to follow; they may even reject both. A Muslim would have to take a stance that the children be raised as Muslims.

Conversely, a Muslim man is allowed to marry a chaste Christian or Jew (who are referred to by Muslims as the ‘People of the Book’), and the woman can keep her religion, but they must agree that the children be raised as Muslims. A Muslim man must preserve his wife’s religious freedom and allow her to go to her church or synagogue, because Allah (ﷻ) has given the People of the Book a special status. These religions come from the same source as Islam; they were revealed to the prophets and — in their original form — revolved around the worship of one God, who is our Creator. So the Muslim views the situation differently than a non-Muslim, because the non-Muslim may not recognize Islam’s legitimacy or that we share the same roots with them. This is the reason why a Muslim

woman should not marry a non-Muslim, while Allah (ﷻ) allows the Muslim man to marry a Christian or Jew, in light of the man being the head of the household.

I was determined to marry this Muslim man. I wanted my spiritual level to increase. I wanted to share my religion with my husband and worship together with him. I had to obey Allah (ﷻ) and marry a Muslim.

We got married the following week at the courthouse and had the engagement party; we planned to have the wedding party later. My husband had to leave because of his work. This was a difficult time because I missed him so much, but I had to be patient. I finished up my job and prepared to travel with him. We were apart for two months. This was not easy for me because he was my husband and my best friend; he meant everything to me, so I missed him tremendously.

In Muslim countries, especially in the tradition of Arabs, the couple is officially married on paper, but until they have the wedding party, they act more like an engaged couple. Officially in Islam, all that is needed is the marriage contract and two witnesses to complete the marriage, though the wedding party is highly recommended. According to Jordanian culture, there are usually two parties: the engagement party and the wedding party. The 'engaged' couple can go out together in public, but they do not consummate their marriage until after the wedding party.²⁶

Our engagement party was thrown together quickly because my husband had to travel soon afterwards, but it was a joyful celebration. We had desserts, Islamic songs and dancing. The women sat inside and the men outside. This is the way that most practicing Muslim families hold their wedding parties; the men and women are separate. My husband was the only man to enter the women's area, and those women who were not his close relatives put their hijabs on until he left. He stayed with me for half an hour, and we danced. His mother

and sister danced with us. His mother, of course, was very happy. My husband and I had our picture taken; later I sent some photos to my parents.

My father eventually accepted things. He was not so happy about it, but after a year he changed his mind. The catalyst for this was when he got an infection due to his diabetes and had to have his leg amputated. He spent several months in the hospital and tried to learn to walk with an artificial leg. He was alone most of the time, so he had time to think. This experience changed him.

I called him while he was in the hospital, and he was very happy to hear from me; I could hear it in his voice. He told me that he loved me. It made me happy to finally hear these words after our 'problematic' relationship. He had accepted my husband and the fact that I was a Muslim. After that phone call, he was much more respectful towards me. It had taken about ten years, but finally we had reconciled. I was very happy, relieved, and of course, very thankful to Allah (ﷻ).

The last few years have actually been the best years of my whole life. I have seen easy and hard times, but I am sharing the burden with the most wonderful husband in the world, thanks to Allah (ﷻ). He treats me with respect and kindness, supports me in everything I do, and helps me whenever I am sick. On a daily basis, I thank Allah (ﷻ) for my precious gifts: my husband and my children.

What makes our relationship so special is that our hearts, minds and souls flow together in the same direction. I feel blessed for this because many people go through life never finding such joy. I suffered and waited for years before I found it. I feel that it is a reward for my patience, and I am very thankful that Allah (ﷻ) has given me such gifts. My husband and I worship together, and it is so wonderful to share this part of our lives. It is a type of ecstasy, mutual respect, and joy. I cannot fully explain the feeling of sharing with him in the acts of worship through which we develop our relationships with

Allah (ﷻ). I feel blessed, and I feel sorry for those who have unequal marriages where they do not share aspects of their lives with their mates, especially religion.

The tests of life that I have seen have taught me endurance, strength and patience. I have endured intense heat, dusty conditions, lack of electricity and estrangement from family and friends. Of course, it is hard, but one must learn about real life and understand how others live. I have known women who moved to Sudan and then returned to their own countries after only a week. I have also known some who could not even handle the life in Jordan, though Jordan is very modern; they ran back to their families in America, leaving their husbands. Why is it that some people can have no patience? I truly believe a woman's place is with her husband, and that she should go anywhere with him, unless the circumstances really do not permit this. How can the couple survive a long separation? How can the children do without a parent? A family must stay together, even during hard times.

When I compare life in the West to that of many third world countries, I realize that many Westerners take so many things for granted (like continuously hot running water, even clean water, and continuous electricity). I also see how careless some Westerners can be with the blessings of Allah (ﷻ). Electricity, water and food are so often wasted without caring. In the third world, life is indeed difficult, and one learns to appreciate things more because they are harder to attain.

Many in the West are caught up in the fast life while seeking money, power and position, yet they remain unhappy. Happiness does not come from material possessions. Yes, money helps to ease our lives and to feed us, but it does not always make us happy. It can even cause more woes.

It is interesting to watch how Africans, particularly in West Africa, lead a laid-back life. There are many who are becoming

‘Westernized’ and working hard to reach the ‘golden ring’, or the ultimate goal, but still the attitude is to relax and enjoy life. They enjoy family and tribal relationships and relax with their friends. In general, they are content living a simple life.

This is a cultural attitude, and even in Islam, we find that one should be content with whatever Allah (ﷻ) gives him or her and should always be thankful.

Happiness comes from within; a person can actually choose whether to be happy or sad. Stephen and Sean Covey, in their book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, have taught that: “Others don’t make us angry; we make ourselves angry.”²⁷ In other words, we choose to be angry. We can also choose to be calm and patient, but how many of us do?

«Abu Hurayrah (رض) narrated that a man said to the Prophet (ﷺ): Advise me. The Prophet (ﷺ) said: Do not become angry and furious. The man asked (the same) again and again, and the Prophet (ﷺ) said in each case: Do not become angry and furious.» (Bukhari)

Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) also instructed us to control our tongues. Abu Hurayrah (رض) narrated that the Prophet (ﷺ) said: «A slave (of Allah) may utter a word that pleases Allah, without giving it much importance, and because of that Allah will raise him to degrees (of reward). A slave (of Allah) may utter a word (carelessly) that displeases Allah, without thinking of its gravity, and because of that he will be thrown into the hellfire.» (Bukhari)

How often do we allow ourselves to say hurtful things while we are intensely angry? The tongue can get us into trouble. Non-Muslims can also appreciate this advice. President Thomas Jefferson (who had read the Qur'an) used to say: “When angry, count to ten before you speak; if very angry, a hundred.”²⁸

If we could learn to be patient and more easy-going, this would help us to minimize stress and have better health. It would also help us socially, enabling us to make and keep better relations with people.

In the Qur'an and *Hadith* (the collected statements and actions of Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) that, with the Qur'an, form the basis of Islamic law), we find practical advice for life. If we followed Islam as it should be practiced, we would all be much happier with ourselves and with others.

An Arab poet said: "One can reach nobility even if his clothes are tattered and his pocket is patched."²⁹ Dr. 'Aaidh al-Qarni interprets this to mean that "a person's character and qualities are the yardsticks of his worth."³⁰

True civilization and advancement do not come from technology and money but from character, morality and how we deal with others. Islam is not just a religion — it is a way of life that provides the solution to every problem.

People worldwide must learn to share, cooperate and try to help their fellow humans to have a decent level of life. This is only fair. They really cannot understand the lives of others, the realities of hardship and the real conditions of another country until they have seen it with their own eyes and even experienced some of it. Then they know and can actually empathize. I encourage everyone to travel to at least one foreign country in order to learn about other human beings and develop an understanding of other cultures. St. Augustine said, "The world is a book, and those who do not travel read only a page."³¹ Travel is an excellent form of education.

It is nice to enjoy life, and one may possess money because he or she worked hard for it and deserves it, but it would be really nice if more people learned to share with those who are less fortunate. Islam emphasizes giving charity to those who are in need. One reliable way to give to those who are truly deserving may be through a mosque or some charitable center that can identify and locate those who are genuinely in need.

In Sudan, I found that many of the more fortunate Sudanese were really generous in giving food, especially during the month of

Ramadan. Also, rather than throwing away leftovers, they usually give this food to the poor. This is something that people in the West should do more of, since so much is wasted on a daily basis. There are some organizations that collect and distribute leftover food from hotels and restaurants, but tons of food get thrown out daily in America without being packed up and given to some kind of food shelter. What a waste!

Sudan is relatively safe, especially in the capital of Khartoum and nearby cities. People there may lie or steal but it is very rare to find murder. (Of course, deaths from the wars that it experienced are a different story and in a different category, as is the unfortunate situation in Darfur.)

Khartoum is the most advanced part of the country. As I mentioned before, Sudan has most necessary businesses and conveniences. They produce bananas, mangoes, guava, oranges, grapefruits, and other fruits and vegetables. They have good quality fresh fish and are famous for their livestock.

Sudan suffered a lot during its civil war, but finally a peace treaty was signed. I do hope that they can hold onto the peace. However, the problems in Darfur still exist, and this is a complicated matter. May Allah (ﷻ) help these people. There are a lot of poor and illiterate people in Sudan, but there are also highly educated, hard-working people who are trying to develop their country. One unfortunate fact is that many of Sudan's educated live outside of Sudan in other countries. The living conditions, as well as low salaries, do not encourage many to return.

Sudan has a lot to offer, but time is needed to develop the land, the economy, the country and the people. In the future, it could become a tourist destination. Visitors can take boat rides on the Nile River and see the pyramids in the North. There are local markets and shops. There are even wild animals. There is a small zoo, but it has not been maintained well, probably due to lack of finances. When I visited,

they had one lion, some monkeys and some chimpanzees, as well as ostriches, peacocks and other wild animals. Most of the wild animals are found in the rural areas and in the Southern part of the country. Of course, one cannot go out in a city like Khartoum to view wild animals. Safari tours are just beginning there, while most people travel to places like Kenya and Tanzania, which are already set up for safari. One never knows the future. Maybe safari will also take off in Sudan one day, too.

All of Africa is in a rough condition, with a lot of poverty, rocky economies, hunger, harsh conditions and illiteracy; some countries have also been damaged by civil war. These problems stem from the past issue of colonialism. This part of the world, including the Middle East, suffered from foreign occupation and imperialism in the past, and when the foreign powers left a country, they often left the economy and infrastructure in a terrible condition. Still, we find that most African, Middle Eastern and Asian nations still have close ties to countries that had formerly occupied them. Some of these former colonial powers are still gaining benefits from these nations without physically occupying them.

Africa is a developing region with a lot of natural resources. We can only hope that they will build themselves up and be able to enjoy freedom and prosperity. At the moment, nations around the world are suffering from a weak economy. Whenever the United States suffers, the whole world suffers because we now live in a global market. This includes African countries, where people are still trying to rebuild, even after decades. In some areas, there is still a subconscious memory of the occupation they suffered from foreign powers, and this affects their work and their economy.

One of the world's major crises now is the occupation of Palestinian lands and the effect that this has on the stability of the larger region. It is not just a Palestinian or an Arab problem; it involves all Muslims around the world because the third holiest site

to Muslims, after Makkah and Madinah, is *al-Masjid al-Aqṣâ* ('the Farthest Mosque', which is mentioned in the Qur'an) in Jerusalem.³² If the whole region is to be successful and secure, there must be a solution to the Palestinian problem — a just and equitable solution. What do most people love most in their lives? Surely, every human desires freedom, dignity, respect and rights. We hope one day soon to see the Palestinians enjoy the rights and freedom that others around the world take for granted.

I had the opportunity to visit the beautiful, blessed, holy land of Palestine. The Palestinians that I met there were very friendly, helpful and hospitable; they treated me with respect and kindness. I visited Hebron, Jerusalem and Ramallah, which are all located in the West Bank region. Jerusalem is divided roughly in half, with the Israelis taking West Jerusalem and the Arabs mainly living in East Jerusalem. Even though I was guided through these cities on a quick, short trip, I was able to get a taste of this beautiful land.

I prayed in Prophet Abraham's Mosque in Hebron, the place where the tombs of Abraham (ﷺ), his wife Sarah and his son Isaac are located. The Israelis have divided it in half, too, and they allow Jewish worshippers to enter one half. It is heavily guarded; visitors are electronically searched and have their bags searched before being allowed to enter. At times, the Israelis even close it. Inside, I found the structure to be very beautiful and peaceful. I felt as if Prophet Abraham (ﷺ) was really beside me; it was a beautiful feeling, and I started to cry. I saw a woman in the mosque who caught my attention. She was a covered Muslim woman who was also there to pray, but the startling thing was that her face looked just like that of my half-sister. This woman looked just like a photo I have of her when she was younger. This was a special and heartfelt visit for me.

We visited some very kind people in Ramallah while we were there. I even got a chance to visit an English language school, which had a reasonable program.

Then I traveled to Jerusalem, which was what I had been waiting for. My heart was beating anxiously as I entered the ancient, holy city. I could hardly wait to see al-Masjid al-Aqṣâ, which is so special to all Muslims worldwide. It is the place where Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) prayed with the other prophets before he ascended with the angel Gabriel (ﷺ) to heaven, where he spoke with Allah (ﷻ). The five daily prayers were established during this special heavenly visit.³³

We entered the big gates and walked across the stone pavement towards both mosques. First we prayed in the Dome of the Rock Mosque, which was built long ago by an early Muslim caliph. I was able to pray under the suspended stone; it is said to have been miraculously suspended, and the mosque was built around the stone. I was amazed at the spaciousness of this mosque and its elegant decorations. It was so peaceful; I felt calmness and serenity there.

We went across the courtyard to al-Masjid al-Aqṣâ, and I prayed several prayers there as well. We sat there for a while and looked out of the window. It was a large mosque, too, with beautiful, intricate designs and stained glass windows like the other mosque. It was peaceful, quiet, and calm. This was one of the most special events of my life. Prayers in the famous mosques in Makkah, Madinah and Jerusalem earn more rewards than prayers in ordinary mosques, due to their special status with Allah (ﷻ).

The Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) said, as narrated by his companion Abu Sa'eed al-Khudri: «Do not set out on a journey (for religious devotion) but for three mosques: for this mosque of mine (at Madinah), the Sacred Mosque (at Makkah) and al-Masjid al-Aqṣâ (in Jerusalem)...» (Muslim)

After leaving the mosque, my host and I visited the marketplace. Israeli guards were everywhere, carrying machine guns – poised and waiting for any wrong movement. It was a little nerve-racking. I was directly beside one soldier when a young boy raced past me. He was just a normal boy running by, but the guard shouted at him to slow

down while he held his hand close to his gun 'just in case'. That was too close for my comfort, so I rushed out of the way quickly. Luckily, nothing happened.

I blended in easily, probably because my way of dressing made me look like an Arab. There were some foreign tourists in the market, who were there to visit the ancient Christian church. Some looked at me strangely, as if they thought I was a foreigner like them, yet they were not sure because of the dress. It is remarkable how people from the same area can spot each other around the world.

In the market, there were smells of spices like zaatar and sumac, of fruits like guava, and of food from the restaurants. We ate some delicious *kanafa* (an Arabic dessert) from one restaurant. I spent my time in the market buying some gifts for friends and some souvenirs for myself. I really enjoyed my trip.

The most beautiful place that I visited in Palestine was Hebron. The grapevines were plentiful, and I ate fresh figs with my breakfast. The early morning dew made them a little cold. Hebron is famous for the production of grapes, and the people there make many things from grapes. In addition to drinking grape juice and eating grapes, I tried delicious desserts made from grapes, like *melande*, which is like a fruit roll, and *khabeisah*, which is similar to cream of wheat but made from grapes, with walnuts and 'black seed'³⁴ added to it. I enjoyed dried grapes (raisins), as well as the famous stuffed grape leaves, a dish that is popular throughout the Middle East. This area reminded me a little of the land my parents had while I was growing up; we had a garden and several trees. We had a peaceful, simple life with my mother canning fruits and making jam every summer and fall.

A blessed, beautiful land like Palestine should not prompt one to think of politics, yet it is politics and occupation for which it is known. I remember that before the age of seventeen, I was oblivious to politics and news. I watched films, television series and MTV and

did the average things that most teenagers did. Once I entered the university and started meeting people from around the world, I realized how little I knew about the world around me, and it was slightly embarrassing. I was indeed a product of my society and generation.

I was determined to change all of this, so I started watching the news and reading magazines. I increased my knowledge of other countries and used a map to learn where those countries were. I began to enjoy the news and the learning. I found politics to be interesting, so the door was opened for me. Finally, I began to understand life and how the world functions. This educational and political awakening took place around the same time that I began the spiritual journey that ended with my becoming a Muslim.

I definitely advise today's youth to try to watch some news and to learn geography. Today we live in a small, global village, so we should know the people in our neighborhood. Understanding them will bring us closer together and help us communicate so that we can all cooperate for a better world for all of humankind. Today's younger generation is tomorrow's future, so we should all be concerned about their educational and intellectual level and strive to raise it. Otherwise, we may be destroying ourselves.

In the film *Forrest Gump*, the main character was fond of saying that life is like a box of chocolates, but I would say that life is not like a box of chocolates. Yes, it is varied and unpredictable, but it is more complicated than a box of chocolates. Yes, there are happy moments and 'vacations' from our troubles, but each day brings something new. We experience many trials and troubles; from these trials, we can choose to learn life's lessons and build our characters, or we can choose to succumb to depression and give up. When we encounter hardships, we should look at our attitudes and perceptions in order to change things. We should look towards Allah (ﷻ). He can alleviate any suffering because if we call upon Him, He will support us

throughout the time of difficulty and make it easy for us. If we are optimists, we can learn a lesson; it may teach us patience, it may be a test of faith, or it may build strength in us. We can choose to embrace the lesson and brace ourselves for the coming storm, with faith and optimism. During hard times, my favorite quote is the old saying “All things come to an end,” which reminds me that one day this problem will be over, so I just need to be patient until then.

My life experiences, both good and bad, have made me the person I am today. I would not change a thing, not even the awful, hurtful experiences. They are now a part of me and of my identity. I have gained courage, strength, patience, wisdom, and so much more. Allah (ﷻ) gives us all examinations; this is part of the reason why we are on the earth. We have to prove our faith and show our loyalty to Allah (ﷻ). We have to carry out the task for which we were created, and that is to worship Allah (ﷻ). Some people willingly choose to do so, while others choose not to, but look how generous the Creator is. Allah (ﷻ) even gives sustenance and gifts to the disobedient people in this life, and yet they are not thankful. Our good deeds and patience are the treasures we gain in this life, and they are our keys to paradise. In the end, though, it is not good works that gain us entry into paradise; it is the grace and mercy of Allah (ﷻ). These good deeds, however, please Allah (ﷻ) and will help us in gaining His good pleasure. Allah (ﷻ) expects us to do good deeds and to obey Him because we love Him. Islamic scholars teach that the best way to show thankfulness to Allah (ﷻ) is by complete obedience to Him.³⁵

Some of my trials have been physical. These physical hardships can indeed give one more strength and patience. They are tests in and of themselves. Whenever I suffer a lot, I recall Prophet Job (ﷺ), who was so patient under every kind of hardship imaginable. When he finally called on his Lord to relieve his suffering, Allah (ﷻ) answered his supplication and gave him even more possessions and children than he had before, as well as giving him renewed health.

Patience has its rewards, both in this life and in the next life. Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) said: «No Muslim will suffer the prick of a thorn or a greater affliction except that Allah (ﷻ) elevates him on account of this by a degree and erases one of his sins.» (a sound hadith recorded by at-Tirmidhi)

Women do suffer a lot of physical hardships. I think that if a man were capable of having children, surely he would be convinced that one is enough because of the pain of childbirth — but look how strong women are! They have two, four, six or more children. One might wonder how they can endure so much pain.

In Islam, the mother has a special position of respect. Her children should serve and obey her before their father.

«A person said: Allah's Messenger, who amongst the people is most deserving of my good treatment? He (ﷺ) said: Your mother, again your mother, again your mother, then your father, then your nearest relatives according to the order (of nearness).» (Muslim)

There is an old Arab saying that “Paradise is at the feet of the mother.” This is because of all the suffering she endures and the patience she has during the hardships with her children — not just in pregnancy and childbirth but even as they grew older and cause her difficulty.

Every day, I think of how best to raise my children. I want them to have a high academic level, to be bilingual or even trilingual and to be good, practicing Muslims. There must be a balance among all of these things. I want them to learn swimming and other useful skills, and I want them to be happy and successful. Therefore, my job is difficult. Many mothers constantly worry about their children's welfare, and they lose sleep over it. To be a mother, or even a father, is a jihad; perhaps it is one of the greatest struggles, if one is to be a good parent.

The Prophet (ﷺ) said: «The greatest jihad is with the self.» (Bukhari) This refers to changing our bad habits and developing

ourselves. Indeed this narration is so true, especially as we struggle with ourselves and with our children. As David O. McKay says, “The greatest battles of life are fought out daily in the silent chambers of the soul.”³⁶ This is the real battle of life — between good and evil within oneself.

I hope that my children will one day see the beauty of Islam as I see it. It is like a shining, bright, illuminating torch at the end of a dark, pitch-black tunnel. Islam is like the largest pearl in the world, very rare and precious. Islam is my guide to life and to true happiness — the happiness inside my soul and the ultimate peace.

My new test is how to deal with the pressures of everyday life. It is not easy trying to write, study and carry out my other duties while having a baby around the house. There are six years between my youngest son and my daughter, so it is as if I am learning all over again. It is a joy watching her laugh, learn and play, but like all babies, she requires a lot of attention and care. All of my children like to move around a lot and are quite energetic. This is tiring at times, though it is a blessing. Inshallah it is a sign of intelligence.

I have also discovered that the struggles of parenting can actually increase as a child grows older. While it is true that babies keep one awake, and one must continuously chase after them, older children have more activities. They also have different sets of problems with peers and related issues. A parent will always worry about his or her child, even when the child is forty years old.

While I was in Africa, I met women who complained about being bored, and some women became depressed. Inactivity and always being alone in the house can indeed lead to depression. However, we can choose to push ourselves into getting involved in our children’s school or in the community. Volunteering our time is a form of charity, and seeing others often helps prevent us from feeling lonely. I keep myself busy with a lot of volunteer work, so I have little time to think of boredom. Even if we are stuck at home, we can choose to

study online or to read books. Studying the Qur'an and memorizing it is a good way to keep a person busy. If we are creative, we can find healthy and beneficial activities to avoid boredom.

Of course, I get exhausted and even sometimes depressed. I am only a human being. However, I chase the sadness away with supplications and Qur'an recitation. Remembering Allah (ﷻ) and constantly seeking His help and support gives me energy to carry on. The reformer Martin Luther said, "I have so much to do today, I'll need to spend another hour on my knees."³⁷ Covey describes Luther's view on prayer: "To him, prayer was not a mechanical duty but rather a source of power in releasing and multiplying his energies."³⁸

Prayer really does give us strength to carry on, and it increases our patience. May Allah (ﷻ) give mothers extra strength, energy and rewards. Women, particularly mothers, do a great service for society, especially those who really try to teach and raise their children well. It is a challenging job that sometimes goes unappreciated. Men, and the rest of society, should respect mothers and recognize their special qualities. Mothers deserve special recognition — and not just on Mother's Day. Mothers should be applauded and appreciated daily. Islam, the true Islam, respects and elevates the status of mothers.

I thank Allah (ﷻ) for everything — most of all for my children and for allowing me to feel both the sorrows and the joys of motherhood. Allah (ﷻ) has given me knowledge, experience and some wisdom. Inshallah, I hope that He (ﷻ) will increase my knowledge and wisdom. Most of all, I thank Allah (ﷻ) for leading me to Islam and to Him. He (ﷻ) is my source of comfort, my strength and my best friend.

I have come to realize that I am not a representative of my country, but I am a representative of Islam. I have developed my own identity, and this is what I carry with me from country to country. I am who I am, no matter where I live and under what conditions. I feel the

brotherhood and sisterhood of Islam. I represent all human beings and find myself standing up for truth, justice, freedom and equality. I must apply my beliefs, and I desire to work for the welfare of all humankind worldwide. This is a kind of freedom, when my mind is free and I can act with goodness and fairness, without bias. I desire good for both Muslims and non-Muslims; there are certain things that every human should have available simply because he or she is a human: free medical care, free education, a home to live in, clothes to wear and food to eat. These are the basic rights of all humans, regardless of who they are, and this is the beauty of Islam. Early Muslim caliphs tried to implement such noble ideas, and some were very successful. They took care of their citizens, including the non-Muslims. This is the attitude I would like to see among all world governments; they should fulfill the needs of all their citizens, regardless of race or religion. They should also learn to tolerate others who are different and try to cooperate with other countries for the benefit of all, rather than isolating themselves. May Allah (ﷻ) guide them and all of us.

LIFE'S SUDDEN SURPRISES

*L*ife is always changing, and we never know where we may end up. A few months ago, my family and I moved back to the United States. It took a little adjusting, since I had lived abroad for quite some time; for example, technology has really advanced in the U.S. since I left. I had visited several times, but living in a place is different from visiting it. There are a lot of good and positive things about living in the U.S. I am thankful that I can see my relatives much more now. My mother is probably the happiest of all, and my youngest daughter has really become fond of her. I do not know where my future will take me, but I do know that I will happily travel on this road wherever it may lead because I will be doing so, inshallah, with the intention of serving and pleasing Allah (ﷻ).

AFTERWORD

J do hope that the reader has gained some useful advice and wisdom, as well as some insight into the life of a convert and some understanding of the life of a Muslim.

All praise be to Allah (ﷻ) Who has given me my life, my family, my health, my talents and my skills. Allah (ﷻ) has indeed blessed me and given me much to be thankful for. My metamorphosis, though it appears complete, is actually still continuing and evolving. Each day brings me a new lesson, thus changing this ‘butterfly’ daily.

I would like to add some personal thoughts here at the end, which I hope the reader will ponder. I would like for my life to be an example to others, and I hope to improve myself daily so I can actually become a good role model. We should all strive daily to improve ourselves and to raise our spiritual level.

It is my dream to help develop peace, tolerance and real understanding among all peoples and to promote mutual cooperation for all of humankind.

It saddens me to see the world filled with racism, bigotry and fear of those who are different. Why can’t we embrace and enjoy the differences among people? An Arab proverb says: “One is the enemy to something he does not know.” Roger Bacon stated: “It is easier for a man to burn down his own house than to get rid of his prejudices.”³⁹ How true! This can be true in both the East and the West. We should all strive to meet and actually get to know other people as fellow human beings.

I have been blessed to have traveled to several countries, and this has brought me into contact with many different peoples, cultures and religions. I have met West Africans, Sudanese, Egyptians, Jordanians, Lebanese, Syrians, Palestinians, Saudis, Kuwaitis, Iraqis, Chinese, Malaysians, Indonesians, Indians, Pakistanis, Germans, Dutch people, Latinos, Italians, Irish and British people as well as so many others. Not to mention the fact that I have met Muslims, Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus and others from all around the world. Each is interesting in his or her own way. All are different, and yet they are the same. We are all human beings. Allah (ﷻ) says: ﴿O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you. Indeed, Allah is Knowing and Acquainted.﴾ (*Qur'an 49: 13*)

We all have similar hopes, dreams, needs and desires, and even similar problems and hardships. So why do we fear each other? We need to embrace common goals and work for the benefit of all of humanity.

We should study each others' cultures, languages and religions. We should hold international interfaith discussions with recognized and learned scholars from all sides, from around the world, providing translation when necessary. We should promote mutual cooperative work in charities and in other fields such as science, medicine and education. I often think that we should even consider, especially in light of the great number of Muslims worldwide, having an Ambassador of Islam to address world governments or to act as their advisors when dealing with Muslims and Islamic-related issues, either as part of the United Nations or the United States government. This could help in diplomacy and bring understanding and trust to all sides. Maybe every world government could have an Ambassador of Islam from each of their countries, but they should ensure that the

person is a knowledgeable, practicing and respectable Muslim. The person should also possess other useful skills and knowledge that would help in such work; for instance, it would be a great help if the person spoke more than one language.

In general, we need to work on improving the educational and intellectual levels of all world citizens. They should all be encouraged to attain fluency in at least one language other than their mother tongue, to allow them to know other peoples and cultures and to dispel any fears that they may hold of the unknown. At the very least, tolerance could be achieved, while the ideal result would be to embrace the differences among peoples and to enjoy the variety that Allah (ﷻ) has placed on the earth.

Let us go out into the world, plant seeds of happiness and faith, and water them with knowledge and understanding. Let us not delay, and let us work for our future and the good of our children's future.

﴿Never will you attain the good [reward] until you spend [in the way of Allah] from that which you love. And whatever you spend — indeed, Allah is Knowing of it.﴾ *(Qur'an 3: 92)*

NOTES

¹ The word ‘We’ is used by Allah (ﷻ) to describe Himself. This is like a ‘Royal We’ that the ancient kings used to use when they referred to themselves and their majesty. Allah makes it clear in the Qur'an that He is One God without partners.

² The translations of the meanings of the verses of the Qur'an in this book are taken from: Saheeh International Translations, *The Qur'an: Arabic Text with Corresponding English Meanings*, Abul Qasim Publishing House, 1997

³ Bible: I Timothy 6:10: “For the love of money is the root of all evil.”

⁴ For more about Şâlih (ሮስ), see Qur'an 7: 73-9, 11: 61-68

⁵ See Qur'an 2: 51-61, 7: 103-137 and 7: 148-156.

⁶ For more about Jesus (ﷺ), see Qur'an 3: 45-59, 19: 16-34, 3: 55-58, 4: 171, 5: 78, 5: 110-118

⁷ See Qur'an Chapter 47, 33: 21, 33: 40, 68: 2-4. For further details on the Prophet Muhammad's life, see Al-Mubarakpuri, *Al-Raheeq al-Makhtum (The Sealed Nectar)*

⁸ In Makkah, the Muslims were a small, persecuted minority, and there was no benefit in pretending to be one of them. In Madinah, they were the dominant group, so there emerged hypocrites who saw advantages in claiming to be Muslim, even if they secretly worked against them.
[Editor]

⁹ Qur'an 7: 148-156

¹⁰ Qur'an 20: 90-94

¹¹ Qur'an 6: 74, 19: 41-48

¹² Qur'an 76: 12-22

¹³ See Bucaille, *The Bible, the Qur'an and Science*

¹⁴ This poem can be read at www.bartleby.com/119/1.html

¹⁵ Abdalati, *Islam in Focus*, 8.

¹⁶ Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, 299

¹⁷ It is mentioned in the Bible that Moses, Aaron, Abraham and Jesus (peace be upon them) used to pray by prostrating and bowing. Refer to Genesis 17:3, Genesis 24:52, Numbers 20:6, Matthew 4:9 and even to *The Gospel of Barnabas* p. 220, where Barnabas says Jesus was 'prostrating himself upon his face'.

¹⁸ Refer to an article on Buddhists and fasting at <http://fasting.ygoy.com/significance-of-fasting-among-buddists>

¹⁹ Pew Research Center, 1.

²⁰ www.youtube.com: *NBC News: 20,000 Americans Convert to Islam Each Year*

²¹ Qur'an: Chapter 96

²² This story is told in Chapter 18 of the Qur'an.

²³ After praying for guidance, the questioner will somehow understand what to do. The answer does not always come in a dream; it may just be that circumstances move in a certain direction, opening the way for a certain decision.

²⁴ www.brainyquote.com

²⁵ www.healthcare-economist.com/health-care-around-the-world-italy

²⁶ There is no actual 'engagement' in Islam. Once the marriage contract has been signed, the couple is officially married, and it is legal for them to consummate the marriage. If they want to terminate the relationship after they have signed the marriage contract, they have to divorce. In practice, they often use this time to get to know each other better and to prepare and furnish an apartment, as an 'engaged' couple would. Usually at a later date, they have a wedding party and begin to live together. [Editor]

²⁷ Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, 78.

²⁸ www.brainyquote.com

²⁹ Al-Qarni, *Don't Be Sad*, 202.

³⁰ Al-Qarni, *Don't Be Sad*, 203.

³¹ www.brainyquote.com

³² Al-Masjid al-Aqṣā is the small mosque with the silver dome, situated across from the Dome of the Rock Mosque, which has a golden dome and is often seen in pictures of Jerusalem. Al-Aqṣā is mentioned in the Qur'an, and the entire complex around it is sacred to Muslims. [Editor]

³³ See Chapter 17 of the Qur'an. For a detailed account, see: Khan, *Summarized Sahih Bukhari*, Chapter 42, number 1589, 737-742. Also refer to Hajjaj, *The Isra' and Miraj*.

³⁴ The technical term for black seed is nigella sativa, and it is also known as black caraway, black cumin or kalonji. Black seed has many healthful properties, and the Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) encouraged its use, saying: «it has a cure for every disease except death.» (Bukhari) [Editor]

³⁵ Murad, "The Wise Disciple"

³⁶ Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, 294.

³⁷ Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, 294.

³⁸ Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, 294.

³⁹ Deedat, *The Choice: Islam and Christianity*.

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SUGGESTED READING LIST

The following books can add to the reader's information about certain aspects of Islam or Islamic thinking. Some are about the life of Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) and his Companions, including his last sermon, which has universal lessons to teach us about the true essence of Islam. Other books deal with how non-Muslims should ideally be treated under an Islamic government, inter-faith discussions and international relations between Muslims and non-Muslims. Some books are to serve the spirituality of humankind, including issues on repentance and the book *Don't Be Sad*. These are the ones that I have read, enjoyed and learned a lot from. I hope you will find them beneficial, too.

Title	Author
<i>Al-Raheeq al-Makhtum</i> (<i>The Sealed Nectar</i>)	Safi-ur-Rahman al-Mubarakpuri
<i>Men and Women Around the Messenger</i>	Khaalid Muhammad Khaalid and Dr. Abdel-Hamid Eliwa
<i>Non-Muslims Under Shari'ah</i>	A. Rahman I. Doi
<i>Salvation through Repentance</i>	Abu Ameenah Bilal Philips
<i>Farewell Khutbah of the Prophet: Its Universal Values</i>	Ahmad Hussein Sakr

Title	Author
<i>The Bible, the Qur'an and Science: The Holy Scriptures Examined in the Light of Modern Knowledge</i>	Maurice Bucaille
<i>The Gospel of Barnabas</i>	Notes and Commentary by M.A. Yousseff
<i>Don't Be Sad</i>	'Aaidh ibn Abdullah al-Qarni
<i>Towards an Islamic Theory of International Relations: New Directions for Methodology and Thought</i>	'Abdul Hamid A. Abu Sulayman
<i>The Isra' and Miraj: The Prophet's Night Journey and Ascent into Heaven</i>	'Abd-Allah Hajjaj
<i>Documentary: "Islam: Empire of Faith"</i>	Directed by Robert Gardener (2000)

GLOSSARY OF ISLAMIC TERMS *

<i>Dajjâl</i>	الدجّال	Antichrist (anti-Christ)
<i>Eid ('eed)</i>	عبد	lit. festival; the two celebrations: one at the end of Ramadan and the other at the culmination of the Hajj
<i>Hadith (hadeeth)</i>	حدث	the collected statements and actions of Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) that with the Qur'an form the basis of Islamic law
<i>hadith (hadeeth)</i>	حدث	a statement or action of Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) that was remembered and recorded by his Companions and followers
<i>hijab (hijâb)</i>	حجاب	veil ordained by Allah for believing women
<i>inshallah</i> (<i>in shâ' Allâh</i>)	إن شاء الله	God.willing
<i>jihad (jihâd)</i>	جهاد	struggle or striving (in Allah's cause)
<i>lâ ilâha illâ Allâh</i>	لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا اللَّهُ	there is none worthy of worship other than Allah

* The Arabic words are transliterated according to the conventions of the Transliteration Chart found in this book. If a word has become part of the English language (i.e., is found in a dictionary of Standard English), that spelling is used in this book and appears first in this Glossary, with the transliterated form in brackets after it.

<i>al-Masjid</i>	المسجد	the 'Farthest Mosque', mentioned in the
<i>al-Aqṣā</i>	الأقصى	<i>Qur'an</i> (17: 1)
<i>Ramadan</i> (<i>Ramadān</i>)	رمضان	the ninth month in the Islamic calendar; the month of obligatory fasting; the month in which the first verses of the <i>Qur'an</i> were revealed
<i>salām</i>	السلام	peace; the greeting of peace
<i>shahādah</i>	الشهادة	testimony, <i>usu.</i> the statement <i>lâ ilâha illâ Allâh, Muḥammadun rasool Ullâh</i>
<i>Sunnah</i>	سنة	the practice and collected sayings of Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) that together with the <i>Qur'an</i> forms the basis of Islamic law